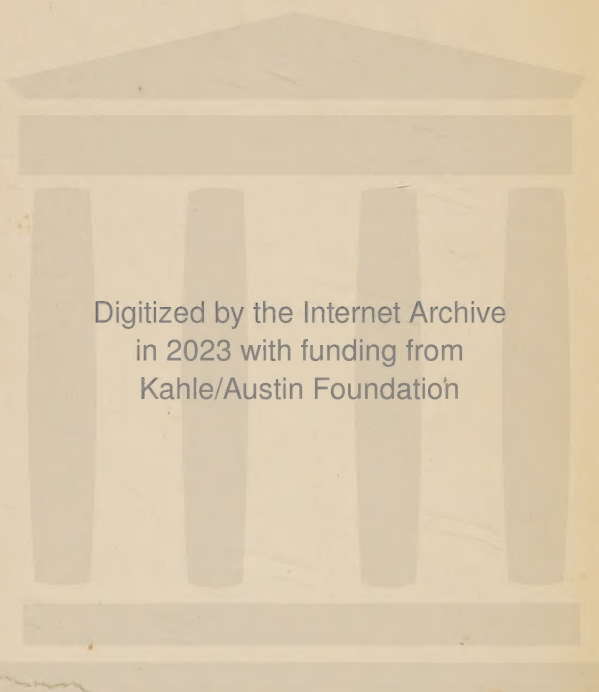


**THE AVENGING
BROTHERHOOD**



IVAN TATTERSALL



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THE AVENGING BROTHERHOOD

BY
IVAN TATTERSALL



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THE AVENGING BROTHERHOOD

CHAPTER I

GEORGE FENNIX, THE DUCHESSE, AND THE GHOST OF A PRIVY COUNCILLOR

YOU see, George Fennix did not really know much about the Société de Bonne Volonté et de Secours Mutuel, or the S.I.B.V. as it was generally called at this time. He did not know much but he suspected it like the devil. And when Francis Hanbury, who had been his colleague at the Legation at Stockholm ten years before, told him over the luncheon table on the Golden Arrow (they had met casually on the train) that he had been appointed secretary to the British delegation, George suspected it still more. Oh! there was nothing against Hanbury, nothing official. Like many another man he had left a badly paid, if exclusive, service to better himself financially—and presumably he had done so.

But George had known him.

George must not be allowed to slip into this tale by a side-door. His name was George Fenix Fennix, C.M.G., M.V.O., commonly called the Honourable, etc., a Councillor in H.M. Diplomatic Service, younger son of the late The Right Honourable Viscount Fennix of Chevely, G.C.B., G.C.M.G., sometime H.M. Ambassador at St. Petersburg and an ex-Governor-General of Canada. He

was forty-two years of age, sanguine, shrewd, the possessor of seven languages, a good income, and much worldly wisdom. He had many women friends but was unmarried.

Such interest as he had in the S.I.B.V. was family rather than personal, for his brother, the fifth Viscount Fennix, was one of the British directors, the others being the Duke of Garth, a die-hard who never left England and thought all foreigners were counts (unless they happened to be street musicians), and Sir Jeremy Tothill, a Nonconformist chocolate manufacturer, who had the somewhat ridiculous habit of founding Peace Chairs at provincial universities.

Jakobsen was the first name George heard pass his brother's lips on his return from the Argentine, where he had been *en poste*. Jakobsen was the burden of the Duke of Garth's after-dinner conversation at old Lady Christminster's house in Portman Square. Jakobsen was the name that dripped like a leaky tap through Francis Hanbury's talk on the Golden Arrow.

Jakobsen, George gathered, was the originator of the scheme, the greatest philanthropical scheme which had ever been set afoot, and he was Secretary-General. A Jew, asked George? Certainly not—a Dutchman who had spent many years in the United States and had acquired great riches there. "A charming fellow," Lord Fennix had said, "speaks perfect English. He collected nearly three million dollars in the States in six weeks and this winter he is canvassing the Riviera. You may meet him down there, George." George said he hoped he would. He was curious about Mr. Jakobsen. When, the day after George's arrival in England, Lord Fennix had discoursed at length on the S.I.B.V., George had summed up as follows: "I see, it is a sort of philanthropic League of Nations with a board of directors, a council and end-

less committees and sub-committees, whose members are in numerical ratio to the size of the countries they represent—three members from Great Britain, France, Germany, Russia and the United States, two from Italy, Japan, etc., etc., and one from Poland, Brazil, and so on. Headquarters at Berne with a permanent secretariat. And the idea is that the society, fed by yearly and emergency subscriptions, shall stand by to help in the event of great catastrophes, such as an earthquake in Japan, floods in the U.S., the failure of the Russian harvest, a new sack of Smyrna, things of that sort, so as to avoid the cumbersomeness and mismanagement of individual relief committees; and to raise by consistent propaganda much greater sums for the sufferers than are usually collected—the average man being rather callous towards the misfortunes of those who live several thousands of miles away, unless he is prompted. I see, I see. It is in fact charity run on business lines, advertisement, no overlapping, strict supervision of distribution and all the rest of it.”

But, but, but . . . Well, George was not impressed when Lord Fennix could not remember a single name of his foreign colleagues without reference. And the names when discovered, though high-sounding, did not carry much weight.

There was something very much wrong with the whole show. George's sister-in-law, Lady Fennix, disapproved of the duchesse of Cheverney with whom George was going to stay on the Riviera. Mme. de Cheverney was his niece. Her name was Avril de Lorges de Cheverney-Bouillon, duchesse de Cheverney, and her husband had been killed in the War. She was said to be the third richest woman in the world. A generation before the Honourable Anne Fennix had married a penniless American inventor against her parents' wishes. Winspear, for

that was his name, subsequently invented a rifle which made the Mauser seem like a toy pistol, and also the most murderous machine-gun that ever furthered the cause of peace. When he died at the age of forty-eight—his wife had died three years previously—he left over forty million pounds to be divided equally between his two children, Courtney and Avril. Avril married the duc de Cheverney-Bouillon, an attractive man with charming manners, who was never really in love with her; Courtney was *par excellence* the man of fashion. For several months in the year he lived with his sister at her villa near Eze, but he had his own flat in Paris, in the Avenue Victor Hugo, a flat in Buckingham Gate, and a two thousand five hundred ton steam yacht. He played polo and danced, gambled and made love fitfully. He was inclined to corpulence, in spite of all the exercise he took, he was *bon enfant* and extremely selfish. But you will meet both of them later. Anyhow, it was with them that George was going to stay when he met his late colleague Hanbury, on the Golden Arrow.

Avril, George had not seen since she was a child, but Courtney had been cruising the previous year in South American waters, and had spent a month with him in Buenos Aires.

Jakobsen! Hanbury's voice trickled on. George, in the rather sleepy after-luncheon stage which attacks us after an early start and a lively crossing, thought he had never heard a name spoken so often. Ever since he had landed a fortnight ago at Southampton, he had heard that name forty times a day at least.

"Jakobsen has taken a villa at Cap Martin," Hanbury said.

"Nice situation," George replied with a yawn, wishing that he might never hear the name of Jakobsen again.

But he was to hear it, and under rather strange circum-

stances before many hours had passed. Also he was to have dealings with Mr. Jakobsen, which form a not inconsiderable part of this tale.

A habit of George's, which dated from the time when he had lived in Paris with his father, then Councillor of Embassy, was to take his *apéritif* at the Café de la Paix on the *grands boulevards*. For a student of human nature there is no more amusing spot in the world.

At a quarter to twelve on the morning after his arrival George seated himself at one of the small tables outside the café and ordered a vermouth-cassis. Although it was mid-winter there was a fair sprinkling of *consommateurs*, for the most part fur-coated, who preferred the frosty brightness of the air outside to the stuffiness within; and George's immediate neighbours were two rather shabbily-dressed men, speaking Russian.

Fifteen years before, George had been third secretary at Petrograd, or St. Petersburg, as it was then, and, unlike most of his colleagues, who were content to use French as an official and social medium of communication, he had taken the trouble to learn Russian. It was true he was not there long enough to learn it very well, and long disuse had made him forget most of what he had learnt, but he still retained sufficient to enable him to follow his neighbours' conversation after a fashion.

George's eavesdropping was perfectly innocent. He had not the slightest intention of prying into the affairs of other people. It was simply a means of passing an idle ten minutes, and of discovering whether he remembered enough of the language for it to be of any practical use. When he had sat down at his table, beyond remarking that they were shabbily dressed, and looked as though they belonged to that rather forlorn colony of cosmopolitan nondescripts which is greater in Paris than in almost

any city in the world, he had not taken any particular notice of them, but, as he began to get the drift of what they were saying, he pricked up his ears, and moved his chair slightly in such a way that he could watch them without drawing attention to the fact. What had aroused his interest was the continual recurrence of the name "Jakobsen." It is a common name in many countries, but its association in their mouths with another name, "Cap Martin," which, as all the world knows, is on the Riviera, a few kilometres from Monte Carlo, made him think it more than possible that the Jakobsen of whom they were speaking was identical with Lord Fennix's and Francis Hanbury's Mr. Jakobsen, who was canvassing the south of France in the interests of the S.I.B.V. As anyone who has tried it knows, it is an exceedingly difficult thing to follow a conversation in a language that we do not know very well, when it is spoken in low tones, and when we are not able to watch every movement of the speaker's lips. As George, who, we must confess, was now eaves-dropping in the most shameless way, did not dare to regard their faces too closely, he lost most of what they were saying, but from the few intelligible words that reached him he gathered that the elder of the couple was urging the younger to pay the closest attention to the activities of the mysterious Jakobsen, and to discover, if possible, his antecedents. The rest of the conversation being carried on in such low tones that it was impossible to catch a single word of it, he turned his attention to their appearance. Though both were dressed in suits of a cheap dark material and ready-made cut, with American shoes and soft black hats, which had seen considerable service, George had the feeling that they were gentlemen. The younger, a tall, lean, good-looking man, fair-brown, blue-eyed, gay, with a resolute mouth and an air of extreme alertness, had, George noticed, beautiful hands,

which were kept as carefully as a society woman's. But though he was a man who would have attracted attention anywhere, it was the other, a clean-shaven, grey-headed man in the sixties, with a nervous habit of raising his left eyebrow continually as he talked, who chiefly excited George's curiosity; for he was quite certain that he had seen him somewhere before.

One of the factors of George's comparative success in life was quickness and sureness of observation combined with a retentive memory. Added to a nimble mind and considerable common sense, this had gained him a reputation for sagacity and far-sightedness, which, though gratifying to his vanity, he was quite aware that he did not deserve; but his capacious memory and the fact that he never forgot a face were things in which he took a just pride.

Though he was as certain as he was of his very existence that he had seen the bent, elderly man with the nervous movement of the left eyebrow, try as he would, he could not think where it was that he had seen him. He racked his brains in vain. He looked back upon half a dozen countries, he recalled a dozen different cities, half a hundred incidents of his life, without getting a clue. The Russians paid, rose and moved away in the direction of the Madeleine. The waiter hovered about his table in a way that suggested a repetition of his order. The hour of his luncheon engagement arrived and passed. Still George sat on, buried in thought. Where had he seen him? Where on earth had he seen him before?

Suddenly the fog lifted, and a picture formed itself in his mind: a brilliantly lit ante-room in the Winter Palace at Petersburg; himself, waiting his turn to be presented to the Tsar in the throne room beyond by the British Ambassador; a tall, dark, *bearded* man, in a Privy Councillor's uniform adorned with three stars and innumerable

little enamel crosses, who had a peculiar nervous habit of raising his eyebrow as he talked, deep in conversation with old Prince Ternine, a "character," a survival of a bygone age, of the spacious eighteen-sixties, when a prince was still a prince, with seigneurial rights over twenty thousand Cossacks and estates half the size of England; and the remark of one of his colleagues, with twenty years' experience of Russia: "Look carefully at those two. They are Prince Ternine and Count Alexaieff, the old school and the new, the two men who might save Russia, if they were given a chance."

That was who it was! Count Alexaieff, shorn of his beard and his decorations, clean-shaven and wearing a ready-made suit, grey-haired instead of black, fifteen years older in fact, twenty-five in appearance, an exile in Paris, instead of a power in Petersburg.

George paid his bill and walked slowly towards the Ritz, where he was lunching. After apologizing to his host for being late, he took the vacant seat, which happened to be next to a Russian of his acquaintance, who had been in his country's diplomatic service under the old régime, and had had the cleverness or good luck to save the greater part of his fortune, which had been one of the largest in Russia. This gentleman, whom we will call Monsieur N., lived in Paris, and, being of a generous and open-handed nature, devoted a considerable portion of his income to his less fortunate compatriots. His house was the focus of Russian life in Paris, and, as George reflected, of all the people he could meet, he was the one most likely to be in the secret of Count Alexaieff's present activities.

George was no bungler, and it was in the most casual way that, after talking for some time on indifferent subjects, he let fall Count Alexaieff's name. Monsieur N. responded at once.

"Ah! poor Alexaieff," he said. "I have always thought that if it had not been for Witte, who feared him and intrigued consistently against him, he might have done something to save the *débâcle*. He was the soul of honesty and a real statesman, in the Western sense of the word—probably the only one we had."

"I saw him once at the Winter Palace, when I was a junior attaché," George observed; "a fine-looking man, with a strange habit of raising his left eyebrow."

"Yes: it was a nervous 'tic' of his," Monsieur N. replied.

"What happened to him?" George asked.

"He suffered the fate of most of the other people who loved and served their country. He was imprisoned for a while, and then, one fine morning . . . they shot him."

"Are you quite certain?" George said, scrutinizing his companion closely. "I was told that he had escaped, and was living in Switzerland."

Monsieur N. smiled slightly.

"I am quite certain," he said. "You have been misinformed."

The tone of Monsieur N.'s voice, and the subsequent slight constraint of his manner, convinced George that he knew perfectly well that in Paris at that moment, under a somewhat decrepit exterior, lived Count Alexaieff, who had once worn the highest orders of Russia and been in the counsels of the Tsar.

CHAPTER II

THE DUCHESS'S TASTE IN TUTORS, AND HOW THE MOST BEAUTIFUL WOMAN ON THE CÔTE D'AZUR DROPPED HER BAG

AFTER George had bathed, changed and refreshed himself with black coffee, he left his servant to unpack and set out on a tour of exploration. On his arrival at the Villa Cheverney, a fortnight after the events described in the last chapter, at half-past nine in the morning, he had been shown straight to his rooms by the butler and had been informed, as though it were the only thing in the world that could be of interest to him, that luncheon was at one; from which he guessed, firstly, that the habits of the house were not unduly matutinal, since none but the servants were about; secondly, that guests were expected to amuse themselves—both of which suited him excellently, for, though he was an early riser himself, he liked to employ the first hours of the day in attending to his diaries and correspondence, and detested a house where the guests were being continually entertained.

After wandering through several vast drawing-rooms, running one into the other, he found himself in a sort of conservatory, opening on to a lawn, which ran down towards a grove of cypress trees overlooking the sea.

As he stood in the open French-window, admiring the view and savouring the softness of the perfume-laden breeze, a tall, slim figure, clad in a white tennis shirt and tight white trousers, buttoned at the ankle, skipped from among the cypresses, and, after a few preliminary

pirouettes, began bounding and leaping in the gayest and most sprightly fashion across the lawn. On approaching the house, the apparition suddenly turned and fled with vivacious gestures of terror towards its lair; but curiosity began to get the better of its apprehension, and it tripped cautiously back with rippling movements of the arms, that suggested a swimmer battling with ethereal waves. Again emotion overcame it, and this time, after making a circuit of the lawn at top speed, it broke into a series of fantastic capers and *gambades*, ending in a succession of prodigious leaps, which so exhausted it that it fell panting upon the ground.

The sound of languid clapping issued from some hidden retreat.

"Good God!" George muttered, when this astounding exhibition was over.

"It is all right, Mr. Fennix; you have not strayed into a mad-house. It is only Harry's new dance," said a voice behind him.

George turned, and was confronted by a tall, slender girl of about twenty-two or three, who seemed to have some difficulty in retaining her gravity. "Let me introduce myself," she continued. "I am Hilda Bellamy, Avril's secretary."

And a very pretty one, was George's mental comment, as he shook hands.

"Avril has gone to Nice in the motor-boat, but she will be back presently. I do not know where Mr. Winspear is—still asleep, I expect. He went to the Polo Ball at Cannes last night, and only got back at six o'clock this morning."

George decided that he liked Miss Bellamy on the whole. Light-brown and gold. A fresh girl; long-limbed and slender, capable . . . a little hard, perhaps. One knew instinctively that she spoke French fluently with a

strong English accent. She was that sort of girl. In spite of her perfections, one could not help liking her; but she was adored by all the people one disliked most, which was annoying. Now do you see the sort of person she was?

"Does—er—Harry often do that sort of thing?" George asked, as they passed through the French-windows on to the lawn.

Miss Bellamy laughed. "He is rather given to it. That is his latest dance; he learnt it from one of the Russian dancers who came to Monte Carlo last month."

"Do you think he would give me lessons, if I asked him nicely? It must be such jolly good exercise."

Miss Bellamy said nothing. There was really nothing to say.

In front of them a summer-house of marble, shaped like a Grecian temple, showed through the trees; it terminated one of three terraced walks, which ran at different levels across the flower-covered slopes leading to the edge of the short steep cliffs above the sea. Behind them rose the great white villa, built on three sides of a square, with two short wings extending up the hill. Very large, but beautifully proportioned, it was built on a promontory, and the grounds, extending fan-wise on either side, mounted gradually to the Corniche Inferieure, a quarter of a mile away.

"How on earth can all the hundreds of people who can perfectly easily manage to winter down here, stay in London?" George exclaimed, gazing at the green lawns and bright slopes, the mimosa and flowering orange trees, the clumps of roses, and the terraces covered with purple bougainvillea. The sun was shining in a cloudless sky, which vied with the sea in vividness of blue, and the temperature was that of a fine June day in England.

"It is lovely, is it not?" murmured Miss Bellamy. "I

often wonder if half the people who do come here really appreciate it though."

The vision which confronted George, when he turned from the contemplation of the villa, was striking enough.

The dancer, who had apparently recovered from his exhaustion, was reclining at the feet of a very handsome, rather artificial-looking woman, wrapped in a long white cloak, lined with ermine, who was lying in a wicker *chaise longue*. It was her listless applause that they had heard from across the lawn. As the dancer gazed at her with theatrical adoration, she passed her highly-manicured fingers through his short curly hair, and fed him with strawberries from a bowl on a table at her elbow.

"I wonder what those two are plotting now?" Miss Bellamy said, half to herself. "Yesterday, they were at daggers drawn."

"Who are they?" whispered George. They were still separated from the Grecian temple by thirty or forty yards.

"Harry Raphael and Colette Brandstetter," Miss Bellamy answered shortly. "Come and be introduced."

"Colette, let me introduce Mr. Fennix," she said a moment later. Mme. Brandstetter gave George a rather large, but very beautifully-shaped hand, and an eloquent look from her big brown eyes—friendly, but appraising. She was a woman who was accustomed to judge men at a glance; there was nothing of the timid maiden about Colette Brandstetter. She was extremely handsome in a rather opulent way, and George guessed from the lazy grace of her movements that she had a trace of Jewish or oriental blood.

"Did you see Harry's dance?" she asked softly. "I think he does it so much better than Lavinsky, don't you?"

"Infinitely better. There is no comparison between

them," George assured her warmly. And there was not, for he had never heard of Lavinsky before.

Turning to Harry Raphael, he held out his hand. "Yours was a most remarkable performance," he said. "Allow me to congratulate you. I had no idea, when my niece asked me down here, that I was going to have the pleasure of meeting a master of the art which appeals to me more than any other."

On receipt of this somewhat elaborate compliment, Harry Raphael, who, had he been able to act at all, could not have failed to have become a *matinée* idol, looked first of all suspicious, and then seeing the perfect gravity of George's expression, fatuous. Mme. Brandstetter appeared rather puzzled, and Miss Bellamy smiled.

"Have a cigarette?" Harry suggested, producing a gold cigarette case, with his monogram in diamonds and sapphires, from the pocket of a loose coat that he had flung over his shoulders. Dancing for duchesses must be a paying profession, George reflected, as he took one, and accepted a match from a match-box of similar design.

"Here comes Lady Hetty," Mme. Brandstetter remarked in her slow, vibrant voice, with a very slight foreign accent.

"Lady Harriet Tuff," Miss Bellamy murmured for George's benefit. He nodded, and glanced curiously at the couple crossing the lawn.

Although he had never met Lady Harriet, her name was very familiar to him, for her eccentricities had given her a European notoriety. She had acquired a real celebrity as the most intrepid woman traveller of her day—she had penetrated into more than one part of the world previously unvisited by white folk, and had imitated Lady Hester Stanhope in passing two mysterious years in the company of a nomad tribe of Arabs—but it had unfortunately been overshadowed by a divorce, bankruptcy pro-

ceedings, and a particularly scandalous libel action, which had brought her personality much more vividly before the general public than her valuable explorations had ever done. She was a small, fair, wiry-looking woman, with shingled hair, dressed as nearly like a man as it was possible for a woman to be, and her conversation was interlarded with expressions which would have sounded crude in the mouth of a stable-boy. Curiously enough, though so apparently devoid of charm, she exercised a great influence over men, and was almost invariably surrounded by a host of admirers, whom she treated with cavalier brutality. Her escort on this occasion was her third husband, a lanky, dissipated-looking young man, some years her junior, who was known to his creditors and the world at large by the tipster-like name of Captain Tuff.

"Hullo, Colette; how are you, dear? Where's Avril?" was Lady Harriet's greeting. She affected a slight Cockney accent. Her brother, Lord Dexter, ninth earl and sixteenth baron, who had cast her off years before, claimed descent from John of Gaunt. Lady Harriet thought titles bloody nonsense, but found hers useful. It inspired confidence in the few European capitals where she was not known.

"Gone to Nice," Mme. Brandstetter drawled.

Lady Harriet sat down in a wicker chair.

"Bertie!" she screamed suddenly. "Go and see what the hell has happened to that butler. If he does not bring me a whisky-and-soda, I shall expire."

As Captain Tuff slouched off in the direction of the house, Lady Harriet screwed a monocle into her eye, and examined George as though he were some rare and curious specimen of the animal world. Not to be outdone, George put up his own eyeglass, and stared back.

"How did you get here?" she asked at length.

"I just blew in," George replied airily.

"It is Mr. Fennix, Lady Harriet," Miss Bellamy explained. "Avril's uncle."

"Hullo, Bellamy, are you there? I did not see you," remarked Lady Harriet. "I suppose you are the brother of the old maid they have made a Director of the S.I.B.V., ain't you?"

"My brother is a director of the S.I.B.V.," George replied coolly.

"Him and Garth and a Nonconformist. My God!"

At this moment servants came with the paraphernalia of drinking. When Lady Harriet had been supplied with three fingers of whisky and a splash of soda, Captain Tuff undertook the duties of barman, for which he was eminently fitted, and began mixing cocktails after a special recipe of his own.

"Where is that tutor?" exclaimed Lady Harriet, addressing no one in particular. "I like him. He is a man, if you like—not like some drunken, good-for-nothin' . . ."

"Oh! shut it, Hetty," Captain Tuff snapped in an exasperated voice from behind the cocktail table.

"I expect Mr. Vincey has gone out with Jérôme," Miss Bellamy broke in hurriedly.

"He is a man, that Vincey," Lady Harriet continued, warming to her subject. "Though Winspear is a lazy dog, he can fence—I'll say that much for him—but Vincey scored ten hits to two against him yesterday. He is the only Englishman I ever met who could really fence—and I know something about it."

"Who is she talking about?" George asked Miss Bellamy, while Lady Harriet was lighting a cigarette.

"Mr. Vincey, Jérôme's new tutor. He has only been here just over a week. Jérôme is Avril's boy, you know, the *duc*."

"Anybody coming to lunch?" Lady Harriet enquired.

"Monsieur Jakobsen and his sister, the baroness," replied Mme. Brandstetter, pinching Harry's ear. That exquisite young man had resumed his place at her feet, and was sipping a cocktail delicately. "I am never quite sure whether I like that woman. She is too good-looking." Mme. Brandstetter looked across at George, and smiled.

"She is all right," Lady Harriet returned, blowing a smoke ring. "A bit too demure—that's all."

"Demure be damned!" exclaimed her husband, energetically shaking his third cocktail. "Don't you believe it."

"Now, don't you pretend you've got any change out of her, because you haven't. I know all about your little affairs, Tuff, and don't you forget it," Lady Harriet began. "Ladies' maids . . ."

"Here come Avril and the Jakobsens," cried Miss Bellamy, greatly relieved at the interruption, for Lady Harriet's wrangles with her husband were inclined to become discursively reminiscent. No respecter of privacy was Lady Harriet, and the most intimate details of her married life were shared uproariously with the first-comer.

George felt that he was in luck. He had thought it possible that he might meet the mysterious Mr. Jakobsen, but he had not expected to find him on visiting terms with his hostess. It was with the greatest interest that he examined the trio coming towards them.

Avril de Cheverney was tall and striking-looking, with masses of red-gold hair. Though you could not call her strictly beautiful her figure and carriage were superb, and the perfection of her teeth and complexion more than compensated for an over-large mouth and a slightly beaky nose. She gave an instant impression of superabundant vitality, which was borne out by a vivacious manner and

an intense unflagging interest in everything about her. She was impulsive, big-hearted, broad-minded and capable; spoilt, exacting, thoughtless and illogical; extraordinarily kind and surprisingly callous; very intelligent and amazingly ignorant; tremendously adventurous but terrified of mice; imperious and humble; in fact, very much woman and very much alive.

When George first saw her with the sunlight falling on her bright hair, for she wore no hat, and watched the supple grace of her movements as she approached, the thought of Brunhilde came to him. There was something free and pagan and goddess-like about her.

Mr. Jakobsen was a fair, shortish, rather bald man, of about forty, with small blue eyes, very cold and steady, pince-nez, a rather broad face with a prominent forehead, thin lips set in a perpetual smile, perfect clothes, small, chubby, highly-manicured hands, an appearance of fastidious cleanliness, and a rather pleasant chirpy voice. He spoke extremely good English with a very slight American accent, and gave an impression of being tremendously alert and wide-awake. He might have been the president of a great banking corporation. It was impossible to think of him as otherwise than immensely successful. George guessed that behind his quiet easy manner lay an insatiable desire for power. There was that air about him.

The last of the trio, Mr. Jakobsen's sister, the Baroness Lewel, the widow, it was said, of a Polish landowner, who had been killed in the first months of the War, interested George, if possible, even more than the other two, for she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen—and he had seen many beautiful women in his time. Tall, dark, between twenty-five and thirty years of age, she possessed every possible perfection of face and form. She was so utterly and totally lovely that George found himself

staring at her like a country bumpkin. The Duchesse, Mme. Brandstetter, and Miss Bellamy were three as pretty women as one would be likely to meet, for example, at a garden-party in England, where the average of good looks is inclined to be distinctly high, but the Baroness eclipsed them completely. Beside her, Mme. de Cheverney appeared gawky, Mme. Brandstetter coarse, and Miss Bellamy insignificant, if we may apply such unkind epithets to three very attractive women.

The Duchesse immediately annexed George, and took him aside. Gay she was, and friendly, boyish. . . . She quizzed her guests in an indiscreet, good-tempered fashion peculiarly her own.

"No; Lady Harriet is not staying here," she said in answer to his question. "She has only motored over from Monte Carlo for lunch. She and her husband have a furnished flat there, which belonged to a cocotte and looks like it. You never saw such a compromising place. When they are not in the rooms, they gamble at home with riffs and raffs that he meets . . . well, wherever one does meet Tom, Dick and Harry—in bars and places, I suppose. He is a dreadful young man, but I like her. She is so completely natural, and she has character. I know she is not considered respectable, but I cannot help that. She is good fun."

"Do tell me something about that amazingly beautiful creature," said George, with a glance towards the Baroness.

The Duchesse laughed. "She makes us all look like nothing on earth, doesn't she? No; don't be insincere and deny it. It is incontestable. There is very little to tell about her, except that brother Courtney is head over ears in love with her, and she will not look at him. She is Mr. Jakobsen's sister, and she married a Pole, who is dead. . . ."

"I thought Jakobsen was Dutch," George said quickly. "So he is."

George said nothing, but he thought a lot. He was willing to bet a hundred pounds to a penny that the Baroness, whose beauty was of the purest Slav type, an oval face, lustrous dark eyes, and rather full red lips, had no more Dutch blood in her veins than he had himself.

"I think you will like Mr. Vincey, Julian Vincey, Jérôme's new tutor," Avril continued. "He has only been here a short time, but he seems a distinct acquisition. . . . The boy adores him already. Courtney likes him too, and he does not take to people easily as a rule. Ah! here he is. Mr. Vincey!" she called.

Julian Vincey came towards them, and George had difficulty in stifling an exclamation of surprise.

After the two men had shaken hands, Avril made to introduce Vincey to the Baroness, whom he had not met before.

George followed Vincey with his eyes. Of all the extraordinary things . . . ! And yet there was no possible doubt about it: none whatsoever. George followed him with his eyes . . . and a curious thing happened. There was Avril's introduction, quick, careless, two names flung together, a gesture, and she moved away. There was Vincey's bow, rather formal, cool, unembarrassed, the bow of a gentleman. . . . And there was the Baroness. . . . On seeing Vincey, she started violently and dropped her bag. George dived for it, and returned it to her, but her hand was shaking so much that she could hardly take it from him. The incident was over in five seconds and no one but George perceived that anything had occurred. Vincey showed no sign of anything. A cool, brown young man—not so young either; thirty-three or four—well dressed in a pleasant, haphazard way. A lean, blue-eyed young man.

He gave Avril an account of Jérôme's morning.

Courtney Winspear, drawn from his bed by the sound of voices and the approach of lunch, joined them, and discussed mutual acquaintances and old times in Buenos Aires with George—but pleased as George was to see his nephew again, it was all he could do to keep his attention fixed on what he was saying. Julian Vincey, Jérôme's new tutor, was Count Alexaieff's shabby companion of the Café de la Paix.

CHAPTER III

GEORGE FENNIX'S DIARY

JANUARY 22nd. I have been here nearly a fortnight, and the plot, whatever it may be, thickens. In fact, I am distinctly glad I came. There is nothing like a mystery to give a zest to life.

Who is Jakobsen? The answer is, Jakobsen. But *who*? A Dutch millionaire. What did he make his money in? He lived for many years in the United States. That is all one can discover; it is maddening! Everyone knows him. He is one of the best-known figures here this year—he is as well-known as the Marquis de Bussy, Victor Dawnay, or my nephew, Courtney—and yet not a soul can tell one anything about him; what is more, everyone is satisfied. The better-informed add, “You know, the S.I.B.V. man.” It is an interesting example of the way people are taken for granted, very much on a par with the S.I.B.V. itself. Everyone is talking about it, but no one questions it. No wonder the world is such a profitable place for rogues.

Jakobsen has been here three times in the last five days, and has had a long talk alone with Avril each time. The last time, yesterday, I had a talk with him myself about the S.I.B.V. If he is a humbug, which I cannot help suspecting, he is an exceedingly clever one. He presented his case for the internationalization of charity lucidly and eloquently and almost succeeded in convincing me of his good faith. Almost! But there are too many undercurrents. What part does Vincey (if that is his real

name, which I doubt) play in this business? What is his connection with Alexaieff?

Avril engaged Vincey as tutor on the recommendation of some Americans, who have now returned to their native country. On cross-examining her as tactfully as I could, I found that she knows literally nothing about him or his antecedents. This is typical of her. I did not remark on the strangeness of not having made any enquiries about the man to whom she was prepared to entrust the education of her only son, for two reasons, (1) because it was not my business, (2) because she is very self-willed and will not bear the slightest criticism of her actions where her friends are concerned: and she, in common with nearly everyone here, has taken a fancy to Vincey.

He is an attractive man, interesting, travelled, well-informed, but as close as an oyster about himself. Try as I will, I cannot get anything out of him about his past life. Though he speaks English as well as I do, I do not think he is altogether English. I should put him down as Russian with an English mother; but it is only a guess. His manner does not encourage interrogation.

Last night, Courtney and I went over to Monte Carlo to play at the tables. After an hour or so I stopped and went out, leaving Courtney playing: it was about ten forty-five or a little later. Before leaving, I arranged to meet him at midnight outside the Hotel de Paris, where he had parked the car. After enjoying the cool breeze on the terrace for a while, I wandered down to the harbour, and, then, up by the Ramps Major and the Place du Palais, into the old part of Monaco.

The narrow streets, so much more Italian than French, and in such picturesque contrast to the expensive cleanliness of Monte Carlo, always fascinate me, and, by the light of the moon, which was nearly full, they were par-

ticularly soft and beautiful. I was standing in a deep patch of shadow under an old archway, admiring the gracious tranquillity of it all, when a man came out of a side street and, after a stealthy look round, knocked at the door of a tall dilapidated house, not five paces from me. After much pulling back of bolts and undoing of chains, the door was opened a few inches. The man who had knocked spoke earnestly to someone inside for the best part of a minute in a whisper, and then after passing something to him which looked like a letter, strode quickly away. Unless my eyes deceived me, that man was Vincey. He had a soft, broad-brimmed hat pulled well down over his forehead, and had the collar of his coat turned up, but his swinging walk, almost a swagger, was unmistakable. It was twenty-five minutes past eleven by my watch.

I went straight back to the rooms, reaching there about eleven-forty. Courtney, who had had a very unsuccessful evening, was smoking in the foyer, and was only too glad to return. The car, driven by Courtney, covered the four and a half miles at an average speed of something like forty miles an hour (Courtney is the most dashing and skilful driver I know), and we reached home a minute or two after twelve. After changing my dinner-jacket for an old coat, I went down to Vincey's rooms (Courtney had gone straight to bed), a bedroom and sitting-room on the ground floor, immediately below mine. As I expected, he was not there.

At a quarter to one, I heard him come in. Ten minutes later I went down again and knocked at his door. He was writing at his table, but received me as though my visit were the most ordinary thing in the world. On the pretext that I was not feeling sleepy, I asked him for a book he had recommended to me the day before. He said that he himself had been feeling singularly wide-awake and had been for a walk; and then added that he was very

thirsty and was dying for a drink. Would I have one? He went out and came back a minute later with a decanter of whisky and a syphon of soda, which had been left in the hall, in case Courtney or I wanted anything on our return. Finding him in a responsive mood, I asked him where he had been. "I walked as far as Monaco," he replied. "You and Winspear passed me in the car as you came back from Monte Carlo."

I suggested that eight miles was a good distance for an after-dinner stroll.

"I had nothing to do," he said, "the other four (Avril, Harry, Miss Bellamy and Mme. Brandstetter) were playing bridge and Jérôme was in bed. Besides there was someone I wanted to see."

"In Monaco?" I asked, wondering what was coming.

"When I was a youngster," he explained, "my father used to have a villa not far from here, and one of our servants is still alive, though he has fallen on evil days. I came across him a week or so ago by chance. As he is very old and in want, I thought I would see what I could do to help him. Mme. de Cheverney has fixed my salary at such a ridiculously high sum that I can afford to let him have a fifty-franc note now and again."

This information was volunteered so naturally and it fitted in so well with what I had seen, that I wondered for a moment if it were not the truth. Two things went against it, however; (1) his stealth, pulled-down hat, and turned-up collar, (2) the information itself, for Vincey is the last person to retail his charitable actions. My impression is that he was safeguarding himself against accidental discovery, for I am pretty certain that he did not see me in my patch of shadow under the archway. We drank our whisky and smoked in silence for a bit, and then Vincey said:

"Who is Jakobsen's sister, the Baroness Lewel?"

"You ask me that!" I exclaimed in surprise, thinking of how she had dropped her bag the day Avril introduced Vincey to her.

"Why not?" he asked calmly.

"Who is Jakobsen?" I countered.

Vincey laughed.

"I thought perhaps Mme. de Cheverney might have told you something about her," he said.

"Are you *épris*? She is a very beautiful woman," I said, smiling.

"Not in the least," he returned coolly. "I only wondered, because she is no more Dutch than you are; and cannot therefore be Jakobsen's sister—if he is Dutch, as he says he is."

I nodded, but said nothing. The same thing, of course, had occurred to me. Presently Vincey said:

"It is none of my business, but does it not seem to you rather a pity that Mme. de Cheverney should give two million dollars to the S.I.B.V. in its present stage?"

"Two million dollars!" I repeated stupidly.

"Look here," said Vincey grimly, "you are her uncle, and I am only a sort of upper servant, though she is kind enough to treat me as an equal; this has nothing to do with me, and you will be perfectly justified in telling me to mind my own business. . . ."

I made a gesture of dissent. He is a white man, Vincey, whatever his game may be—and I was anxious to hear what he had to say.

"Well, what is the S.I.B.V. *in its present stage*? Jakobsen. Who is Jakobsen? You do not know. I do not know. Nobody knows: except possibly Lady Harriet."

"Lady Harriet!" I exclaimed. Vincey nodded.

"Lady Harriet and Jakobsen are as thick as thieves," he said, lighting his pipe, "and for all anyone knows to

the contrary, the S.I.B.V. may be the most colossal swindle ever rigged," he added. Then after a short pause: "Your brother is a director. Has he met any of his fellow directors yet? And have they any control over the money that is pouring in? A friend of mine knows the Marquis de Saint Loup, who is one of the French directors. He is a charming old gentleman with an European reputation as an Assyriologist, but with about as much capacity for business as a child of six. He frankly admitted to my friend that he knew nothing about the society, except what Jakobsen had told him, that the directors were all waiting upon Jakobsen, and that when Jakobsen was ready, the directors were to meet in Berne to decide on a site for a permanent headquarters for the society! And the directors! Have you seen their names? There is not one man of affairs among them." He paused again.

"How did the thing originate?" I asked.

Vincey looked at me steadily. I think he was wondering how far he could trust me.

"No one knows exactly," he said at length, "but I think it started in this way. Jakobsen—you will note that he is the key to the whole affair—Jakobsen got hold, in the first place, of a certain Mrs. Rebecca Partridge, an American lady from the middle-west, with ideals and more millions than she knew what to do with, and introduced her to Siebel, the Norwegian millionaire and explosives manufacturer, who, having spent his whole life in inventing horrors for the destruction of his fellow-men, wished before he died to have his name associated with a permanent monument of peace and goodwill. To these two, he outlined his scheme. Then he added an Australian sheep-farmer, named Palmer, a philanthropically-minded Italian motor-car manufacturer, a French champagne man, the widow of a South African diamond king, and a cattle-emperor from the Argentine. These seven, with

Jakobsen as secretary, founded the Society. The only things they had in common were pots of money and a desire to benefit humanity. It was Jakobsen who held them together. They supplied the original funds, and they elected the directors at his instigation—a clever move, for, in this way, if any of them questioned his actions, he could always say that he was responsible only to the directors, whom they themselves had elected. Once Jakobsen had got his dummy directors elected—all men of position in the world—they were chosen for their names—but inexperienced in affairs of this sort, and far too many to be of any practical use—he proceeded to destroy the power of the original members by electing hundreds of new ones. Anyone giving a hundred pounds, or more, became a life member, and an annual five guineas or its equivalent in foreign currency qualified you for ordinary membership with a vote. Thus the founders of the society, who had put up a cool million between them, were swamped by ten thousand at a hundred and five bob a head! Needless to say, Jakobsen had soothed their feelings by getting them appointed sub-directors and chairmen of committees by their respective directors—it is the only thing the directors have done so far—but as the committees cannot get to work until the directors have met, they are nicely side-tracked. The committees wait on the directors, and the directors wait on Jakobsen. It is the finest example of a one-man show I have ever come across. You would not think it possible, would you, that in a big thing like this one man could hold all the threads? Bit by bit, he has set up a machinery of directors and advisory boards and committees and sub-committees, in such a way that he himself is the sole connecting link between them, if you see what I mean. Their action depends on him. He can set them working and stop them at will. The directors meet once a year, and receive five

hundred pounds entertainment allowance from the society. Who is going to quarrel with that? The permanent secretariat at Berne is very small, very highly paid, and is chosen by Jakobsen in his position as general secretary. They take their orders from him, and they know it!"

"How do you know all this?" I asked.

"In a small way, I am a student of history," he replied, after a moment's hesitation, "and troubled times like these, when the whole world is surcharged with excitement, are inclined to produce strange growths. This one struck me as being particularly strange, and I have taken the trouble to go into it rather more thoroughly than most of the people who have subscribed largely towards it have done. That is all."

I said nothing, but thought a lot.

"Yesterday afternoon," Vincey continued, "I took Jérôme up to Eze, the old, crumbling, time-worn town up on the hill. You know it? I was lying, basking half-asleep in the sun under the old wall of the castle, which is nothing but a heap of ruins, and Jérôme was playing about by himself somewhere out of sight. Suddenly, I heard Jakobsen's voice just above my head. He and Lady Harriet Tuff had met there to talk. I suppose I ought to have let them know that I was there, but I didn't. I just kept quiet. Jakobsen said that the Duchesse had promised him two million dollars for the society, but that it was only a promise; he had not been able to get anything in writing from her. Lady Harriet got very excited, and said some things which would have opened Mme. de Cheverney's eyes, I think. A lot of talk followed, which I did not catch, and then Lady Harriet said: 'Strike while the iron is hot, because I do not like his being there at all. He is a very dangerous influence from our point of view.' I do not know to whom she was referring: perhaps you can interpret it? Then they went

off separately. Their cars were waiting below, outside the little café at the foot of the hill."

"Why do you tell me all this, Vincey?" I asked after a pause.

He shrugged his shoulders. "I was not born blind," he said, "and I do not think you were either. I am grateful for my job. Mme. de Cheverney has been very kind to me; and I have taken a dislike to Jakobsen. He reminds me of those animals with tentacles and suckers that one sees in the aquarium in Monaco—what do you call the things? Octopuses."

I asked him if he had said anything to Winspear.

"No," he replied, "because it would only worry and perplex him. He and Mme. de Cheverney, in spite of their mutual affection, never interfere in each other's affairs, I notice."

I have written this conversation down in detail, partly in order to record Vincey's exact words while they are fresh in my memory, partly in the hope of retaining something of the atmosphere of our talk. On reading over what I have written, though, I see that I have not touched on one of the things which impressed me most: Vincey's reserve. I had the feeling the whole time that he was talking with a purpose, and telling me exactly what he wanted me to know, but not one word more. He is a clever man. Were it not for two accidents, my seeing him with the supposedly dead Count Alexaieff in Paris, and surprising his mysterious visit to the barred and bolted house in Monaco, I should think him exactly what he wishes me to think him.

I have started a letter to my old acquaintance, Curtis, of the *Daily Post*, recapitulating Vincey's information about the S.I.B.V. (without mentioning him, of course) and suggesting that it might be a very good subject for a leading article in the "It-may-be-all-right-but-we-would-

like-to-know-more-about-it" strain. A little limelight on the S.I.B.V., and a little more curiosity on the part of the public would do nobody any harm, except, perhaps, Jakobsen. It is very significant that up to now there has been no adverse press criticism: that is to say, none worth mentioning. That makes one think.

January 23rd. Someone has had a look at my letter to Curtis! I finished it before dinner last night, and left it on the writing-table in the sitting-room adjoining my bedroom, half in, half out of its envelope, while I dressed, meaning to have a final look at it before giving it to Watson to post. While I dressed, the door between the two rooms was shut. Neither I nor Watson, who was in the bedroom practically the whole time, heard anything; but when I returned to the sitting-room the envelope was not exactly where I had left it. My fountain-pen had splashed while I was writing and had made a mark on the blotting-paper. On finishing my letter, I put it (for no earthly reason) just under the blot my pen had made, in such a way that the blot came exactly above the middle of the envelope. Though it was one of those little things that one does absent-mindedly, one's thoughts occupied with something entirely different, I remember it very distinctly. When I went to re-read my letter after dressing, it had been moved an inch or so to the left! It was not the maid, for Watson, who is entirely to be relied upon, made enquiries and found that she was having her supper at that time, and no other servant would have occasion to go into the room; as, except for dusting and cleaning, which is done in the morning, Watson himself is responsible for the order of my rooms.

Who was it? It is very curious, and very annoying, as I had written very confidentially—voicing freely my suspicions of the S.I.B.V., and its instigator whom, of course, I mentioned many times by name, and in none

too flattering terms. Of ourselves, Avril, Miss Bellamy and Courtney are, of course, above suspicion. There remain Vincey, Harry Raphael and Mme. Brandstetter. Vincey I wash out. He is a conspirator of sorts, I know, but there is a kind of defensive alliance (or, perhaps better, a pact of benevolent neutrality) between us; and anyhow he would not consider any correspondence of mine worth the risk of being discovered committing an act of that sort. Mme. Brandstetter and young Raphael both live in this part of the house and have to pass my door in going to the top of the stairs from their rooms. The door into the passage was half-open, Watson thinks, and anyone going along the corridor could have seen my letter displayed half in, half out of its envelope. Still, it needs considerable courage calmly to read a letter under such circumstances. There is a feminine audacity about it which makes me suspect Mme. Brandstetter, though what possible interest she can have in my affairs I cannot imagine.

Courtney, who is as easy-going as anyone I know, the personification of the doctrine of live and let live, dislikes her, and went as near quarrelling as he ever does with Avril about her the other day. He insists that she is disreputable, and was an Austrian spy in Rome during the war! Avril, who has a catholic taste in people, and will forgive them anything as long as they are out of the common ruck, likes her and encourages her languid eccentricities. This *insouciance* of Avril's and freedom from prejudice come probably from her father, who was a singularly broadminded man, and it accounts for the extraordinary people she surrounds herself with. As occasionally happens with people who are beyond suspicion themselves, and through position and wealth socially unassailable, she takes the greatest pleasure in the rather doubtful society of people like Lady Harriet, who, since

the Travers-Vesey libel action, when she only escaped by the skin of her teeth something very much worse than being cast in damages, has been disowned by her brother and her sisters; Mme. Brandstetter, with her questionable past; and young Raphael, whose known history appears to date from the death from cocaine-poisoning of a girl with whom he used to give exhibition dances at the "Lola Montez" night-club. It is in some ways a sympathetic trait in her character, for it comes largely from a desire to be kind to people of whom the world is inclined to fight shy: but it is one which causes a good deal of misunderstanding, for the world is very often right, and Lady Harriet, for example, takes rather a lot of assimilating.

The following is Colette Brandstetter's history according to Courtney, who has friends in every country in Europe and is a walking encyclopædia of gossip. She is by origin a *munichoise* and married an Austrian infantry officer, Brandstetter, twelve years ago, when she was seventeen or eighteen. Her family were theatrical folk in Munich, and she had acted more or less professionally ever since she was a child. After her marriage, she was on the stage for some years in Vienna and, without ever becoming a great star, had a good deal of success. She was the *petite amie* of the Archduke Luitpold. Brandstetter, who was a thoroughly bad lot, played the part of *mari complaisant*, and was rewarded with various ornamental and more or less lucrative military posts, which filled his pockets with money, and enabled him to lead an idle dissipated life. During the war, having previously broken with her archduke, Colette Brandstetter (this part is almost unbelievable, but Courtney swears it is true) lived in Rome under extremely high protection. Though strongly suspected of being a spy, her protection was such that, beyond having to comply with the usual formalities, registration and so on, that foreigners have to comply

with in war-time, she was left entirely free! Brandstetter, who was more at home in officers' casinos and in smart restaurants than in the firing-line, was given a post at Commissariat Headquarters in Vienna, after a few months of active service; but his connection with a particularly grave scandal (one of those complicated neurotic war-time affairs no one ever seems to know the whole truth about, an amalgam of fraudulent contracts, profiteering, actresses, night-restaurants, espionage, and goodness knows what) led to his being sent back to the front, where his ignoble career was ended by an Italian shell. Avril met Mme. Brandstetter two years ago in Meran, and befriended her. She was then very hard up, though she was staying in the best hotel in the place (as such people invariably do—they consider it an investment) and was living on her jewels, which she sold one by one, as occasion arose. She tried to catch Courtney, but that astute young millionaire was not taking any. I imagine he has suffered before from Avril's *protégées*. Life, as seen from the standpoint of an immensely rich man without territorial obligations, has taught him the value of personal liberty, and he is inclined, probably justly, to suspect people of designs upon his person . . . or his purse. Avril knows the Brandstetter's story from Courtney, but in her large-hearted tolerant way finds excuses for what she does not pooh-pooh. I must say I find it hard to swallow the tale of her being allowed the run of Rome in war-time. Still, stranger things happened.

Courtney, according to Avril, is infatuated with Baroness Lewel, and he would have proposed to her ere now, had she not given him very definitely to understand that such a *démarche* would be painful and fruitless.

Yes: on the whole, I am inclined to suspect Mme. Colette. It is a pity, for I rather like her. She is amusing and *bon enfant*.

CHAPTER IV

THE BARONESS LEWEL AT HOME

WANDA LEWEL was sitting on a sofa in the drawing-room of the villa that Jakobsen had taken for the winter at Cap Martin.

It was a large, irregular, rambling house by the sea, looking across to Roquebrune and Monte Carlo, built in no particular style, with unexpected turrets and oddly-shaped rooms, eccentric staircases leading to isolated apartments, which had no apparent reason for existence, a Roman bath, a miniature lake, the "folly" in fact, of a Parisian millionaire with more money than taste, the sort of house we call "original" to please its owners, while thinking to ourselves that it must have been planned in a frenzy, due to over-indulgence in absinthe.

She was strangely immobile in the centre of her purple and gold sofa—a semi-regal throne in the still, light room. A book lay on her lap, Paul Bourget's *Némésis*, but she was not reading; and a cigarette in a green jade holder burned between her fingers to long grey ash, for she never raised it to her lips. There was something completely un-European . . . Asiatic, perhaps, in her statue-like repose. She was the personification of reverie.

Her thoughts were far away from her immediate surroundings, reconstructing, not for the first time, a scene that had taken place many years before in the interior of Russia, on the upper reaches of the Volga. It was a boating accident. She and two girl companions had been suddenly flung from a capsizing boat into the swirl

of grey-green waters. Her companions, who could not swim, had sunk almost without a cry, and a like fate would undoubtedly have been hers, even though she could swim a little, for the swift current was rapidly sweeping her out into mid-stream, had she not been rescued at great personal risk by a young man, who had seen the accident from the path along which he had been riding between the fringe of the forest and the river. It was a wonderful rescue, and Wanda knew that if ever it can be said that we owe our life to another she owed it to that young man.

Wanda was at that time sixteen years old, a highly-strung, impressionable girl with but a suggestion of the great beauty that was to be hers in her maturity; and it was not unnatural that her rescuer, though she did not see him for many years from that day, should have come to embody romance to her, and to have evoked all the strange, delightful, intimate things, which make youth the shrine of revelation.

In the years that followed, her life had not been easy; it had been adventurous and sometimes dangerous; she had known poverty and riches, excitement, never contentment, the semblance of love, never love itself; but an inner passion like a living dream, full, unexpressed, the most and the least real part of her, a source of infinite sadness and exquisite secret joy, sustained and fed her; her unrealizable love for the man who had saved her life when she was a girl, the man who had appeared like a god in the moment of her need, whom she never thought to see again, who had come and gone like a beam of sunlight, warming her and lighting the shadowy corners of her soul. And then one day, she met him, and it was all she could do to keep herself from crying out. He called himself Julian Vincey and was the English tutor to the young Duc de Cheverney.

It was in particular an incident of the previous night,

which drew Wanda's thoughts to Vincey, as she sat so quietly on her purple couch.

In the early morning, unable to sleep and attracted by the brightness of the moon, whose beams fell slantwise across the polished floor of her room, she had risen and gone to the window overlooking the terraced garden and the sea. As she gazed out at the tranquil beauty of the night, her attention had been attracted by a slight movement of the shadow under the trees separating the garden from a little orchard, which ran up to the lane at the back of the house. It seemed to her that she could distinguish two human figures, but they were so much one with the sombre background that she had not been certain. It was no uncommon thing for Jakobsen to receive visitors in the middle of the night and to let them out into the lane by the small door in the orchard wall, but she knew that it could not be he out there under the trees, for she could distinctly hear his heavy breathing in the adjoining room.

Suddenly one of the shadows moved, and for the space of a second, not longer, the moonlight fell upon the face of a man.

It was Vincey!

What was he doing out there at two o'clock in the morning, seven miles from home? With whom was he talking? Wanda was so used to mysteries and enigmas that, had it been another than Vincey, she would have dismissed his presence there with the hundred and one other things about her which she did not understand, or which she only half understood, and have thought no more of it. But with Vincey, it was different; how different!

She was frightened. She hated the secrecy and mystery and intrigue with which she was surrounded. It was dishonouring . . . to her love. She was absorbed by her love, exalted. . . . She caressed it in a thousand thoughts, and made of it a fairy island of delight. That it might

not be immediately returned never occurred to her for a moment. Loving as she did, she had but to speak. . . . She knew that he had not recognized her as the girl he had saved fourteen years before; and she was cherishing the secret until she should have an opportunity of sharing it with him. That moment, when it came, would be the recompense for many hours of sterile dreaming.

Her relations with Jakobsen were curious; probably impossible for anyone who had not Russian blood in their veins, with its almost inevitable accompaniment of oriental fatalism.

Jakobsen worshipped her, and she had obeyed him up to the present without question. She did not dislike him; in fact, as a rule, she rather enjoyed his society, for he was a highly cultivated man, and, when he chose, he could be excellent company; and in the midst of his thousand preoccupations, about which she knew rather less than his valet, he always found time to pay her little graceful attentions and to consult her wishes on all subjects affecting her pleasure and comfort. She was his favourite, incurious, apathetic; and he was an easy-going master, an indulgent pasha rather than an exacting tyrant. But there was no comradeship between them. She knew nothing really of his life, of the underside of the events, which in fifteen years had transformed him from a storekeeper and hotel proprietor in the capital of a small South American republic into an international financier, waited upon by princes and presidents. She never inquired into the gradual expansion of his interests, his political projects. Their sudden journeys together to Amsterdam, to Riga, centres of propaganda, to Moscow, in the grip of revolution, to the Red armies in the field, where she was treated as an illustrious captive, while he conferred with those in command, to villages on the Persian frontier and distant Asiatic settlements, where the doctrines of a genial

German Jew, called Marx, were being applied to Turcomans and Kurds; and sudden returns to civilization, to Berlin and Paris and London, she accepted as an inevitable part of her life, to be enjoyed when possible, to be endured uncomplainingly, when flies and heat and dirt made enjoyment impossible.

That Jakobsen's activities were revolutionary, anti-social, nefarious, words which even in these days still connote something undesirable to the average man, affected her, with the inherent amorality of women, not at all. Abstract principles of right and wrong mean no more to most women than the history of the ice-period. Women as a rule are only awakened to the difference between good and harmful action by the introduction of the personal element; and in her relations with Jakobsen the personal element had, through his secretiveness and her indifference, practically ceased to exist. He worshipped her as a connoisseur of painting will worship the masterpiece of his collection; her beauty was a refreshment after long hours of work; and she was loyal to him, because she cared too little to be anything else—but the moment that her heart was touched, at the very thought of Vincey, she was ready to betray him without a scruple.

In spite of her beautiful clothes, her languages, her gracious manners, she was a savage at heart, as wild and primitive as the dark forests in which she had lived as a girl with her widowed father, a small Russian landowner, a rough, violent man, half-peasant, who used to beat her when he was drunk. Her husband, Lewel, the Pole, had found her on his wanderings and plucked her as he might have plucked a wild flower . . . and then when he died and left her penniless, she had met Jakobsen. . . . Of the three men she had known, Jakobsen was the best. He was jealous, certainly, but he loved her in his way, and he let her alone. It was typical of their curious

relationship that he scarcely ever attempted to use her in his schemes. It was not that he did not trust her; now and again he confided in her: it came rather from a disinclination to mix the two sides of his life. He had betrayed a desire lately that she should try to interest people in the S.I.B.V.—at least she thought so, though the desire had been conveyed to her in the vaguest and most round-about way, as was his custom, and she had an idea that he was thinking particularly of Winspear, though the delicacy which was one of the subtlest elements of his proprietorship forbade him to say so. He hinted. . . . It was an extraordinary trait in a ruthless and terrible man, that exaggerated delicacy.

Wanda moved slightly as she heard a step.

Jakobsen was framed in the open window. He stood still for a moment, watching her with a smile, and then crossed the room to where she sat.

Wanda yawned . . . a frank, sensual yawn, that showed all her teeth.

"Well, Louis, what do you want? When you smile like that, you always want something."

Jakobsen raised her hand to his lips. A very clean scent of perfumed soap and lavender water came to Wanda's nostrils. "I want you to do something that is very easy," he said, producing an oblong case from the pocket of his double-breasted blue coat. "I want you to accept this as a token of my devotion," and he kissed her hand again.

Jewels will arouse the most languid of women; and jewels chosen by Louis Jakobsen, the apostle of international philanthropy, were worth the attention of the most fastidious.

Wanda opened the case, and disclosed a long barbrooch of alternate diamonds and emeralds. The stones were flawless and of a wonderful lustre.

"It is the brooch you admired in Cartier's window in Nice last week," he said simply.

"Comme vous êtes gentil, mon ami."

Wanda fastened the brooch into the soft folds of her cream lace frock. Jakobsen sat down in a *bergère* close to the sofa, and crossed his legs. He was wearing white flannel trousers with a crease like a knife-edge, white silk socks, and white buckskin shoes with brown toe-caps. A white silk shirt, a highly-glazed white linen collar, cut low and long in the point like a polo collar, a white handkerchief peeping from the pocket of his coat (by Scholte), completed his toilet and gave him an appearance of spick-and-span prosperity calculated to inspire confidence in those most suspicious of his financial integrity.

He smiled. He was accustomed to smile a good deal. Fools took it as an indication of a sunny nature.

"Herr von Arndt has arrived," he said quietly.

He spoke in Dutch, by which Wanda knew that he was preoccupied about something. Of the seven languages they had in common, it was the one he used least. They usually spoke French or Russian, but Dutch was the first language Jakobsen had learnt and the one he lapsed into when he was at all excited or perturbed. His father had been Dutch and his mother a Russian lady, of good family, who, a few years after her return to Russia, on her husband's death, when Louis was five years old, had been exiled to Siberia on account of her political opinions and supposed participation in an anti-monarchical plot. It was months since Wanda had heard him speak it.

"You need only see him at meals, unless you like. By the way, Hetty will be here for lunch."

Wanda made a little face.

"She is not really a bad sort, Hetty," Jakobsen said in his pleasant voice, almost apologetically, "but she is a

savage. Civilization has left no impression on her. She is a throw-back to the dark ages."

"Who was that who arrived in a car just now?" Wanda asked, fingering her new brooch. "Was that Arndt?"

"No. It was Colette Brandstetter. She only stayed half a minute. Arndt arrived early this morning from Italy, between five and six o'clock." Jakobsen took a cigarette from an enamel box on the table at his elbow and lit it. "Rakoff and Hetty are a bit of a nuisance," he continued thoughtfully. "If they had their way, they would upset all my work of the last two years. They cannot see that there is a difference between the Riviera and Russia. I am glad Arndt has come: he may make them see reason, especially Hetty. They are old friends. She is a blood-thirsty little devil . . . never happy unless she has someone to hate . . . must be always rampaging about, turning things upside down. What they sent her to me for . . . I don't know. All right queening it over a lot of Kurds and scum in Central Asia, with Franz behind her . . . and she may speak every dialect from Pamir Post to Khiva for all I know or care. What do they want with a woman at all—they are cracked. This is finance, company-promoting. . . . The bodyguard is all right, may come in useful, you never know—but she wants to murder people in their beds. . . ."

Wanda knew that when Jakobsen talked like this, which he did from time to time, laconically, with oblique references to schemes and happenings of which she knew nothing, he was simply giving utterance to what was in his mind, without the slightest intention of consulting her in any way, or of taking her into his confidence. He spoke, as we do sometimes to a favourite dog, to relieve our press of thoughts, without an idea of obtaining a response. As he did not continue, Wanda asked indifferently: "What did Colette Brandstetter want?"

"A bad wind is blowing from that quarter. There is someone who is interesting himself too much in my affairs." Jakobsen was following his own train of thought, but Wanda knew that he meant the Villa Cheverney, and started.

"I should advise him to be careful though. It is not a healthy occupation, spying on me."

"Who is it?" Wanda's voice sounded hoarse, and the colour suddenly left her cheeks. Ashy, she was, and trembling. Jakobsen never noticed.

"Fennix," he snapped, and she stifled a sigh of relief.

"Mr. Fennix! Why should he want to spy on you?"

Jakobsen did not answer this question, but continued: "Hetty is giving one of her awful parties to-night, and we'll have to go."

"I know," Wanda said, listlessly. But her heart was singing at the thought that she would see Vincey there.

"It is a pity that nothing can make Winspear take any interest in the S.I.B.V."

Wanda shrugged her shoulders. "He cares for nothing but sport."

Jakobsen glanced at her swiftly, and then looked away.

"Still . . . it is a pity," he said.

Wanda smiled, fingering her new brooch thoughtfully. It was a maxim of Jakobsen's, she reflected, that only good pay secures good service. She was still smiling strangely and enigmatically, when he passed through the long open windows into the garden, leaving her alone on the purple couch in the still, light room.

CHAPTER V

THREE MEN AND A WOMAN

“**F**OR your benefit, my dear Franz, I will outline the situation as it stands to-day.”

Jakobsen, Lady Harriet, Dr. Rakoff and Franz von Arndt were sitting round the big writing-table in the centre of the large, square, book-lined room, which Jakobsen used as his study: the host at the table itself, Lady Harriet curled up in a deep leather armchair on his right, Dr. Rakoff perched uncomfortably on a straight-backed wooden settee, intended for ornament rather than use (he was a man who seemed to delight in discomfort), and Herr von Arndt on the sofa, supported by all the cushions he could find.

Arndt was a very tall, big, burly man of about forty, with curly fair hair, a close-cropped fair moustache, a rather full, sensual mouth, and an air of good humour, which was belied by a pair of very cruel blue eyes. Born of small nobility in the neighbourhood of Ingolstadt, he had entered the Bavarian artillery twenty years before, and had quitted it five years later as the result of a succession of gaming scandals, which reflected none too favourably on his honesty and proved him to be the possessor of a ferocious temper, which had no place in a civilized community. Jakobsen had run across him in South America, where he was following the none too profitable profession of a soldier of fortune, and had employed him in several dangerous enterprises, in which his courage, brutality and cunning (for he was endowed with

a capacity for dissimulation which, in politer circumstances, might have been a source of affluence to him) showed that he was one of those invaluable lieutenants who can be trusted to carry out the most unsavoury commissions with exemplary thoroughness. The Russian Revolution and the turmoil which succeeded it, found him in his element. After serving for a time on the staff of one of the Red armies, he had been given the command of a corps in Asiatic Russia, where his personal success was so great—he was rapidly welding a collection of warlike tribes into a nation over which he ruled despotically, snapping his fingers the while at emissaries from Moscow, many hundreds of miles away—that it finally needed all Jakobsen's influence to persuade the Tche-ka that he was valuable without being over-dangerous, and to make them rescind the death sentence which had been pronounced against him. This was at the beginning of Jakobsen's rise to power, and Franz von Arndt, partly in gratitude, partly in self-interest, constituted himself peculiarly "Jakobsen's man," and attached himself to his fortunes. This course of action was eminently satisfactory to them both. Jakobsen secured an extremely efficient subaltern, who, having no political sentiments and opinions of his own, and being entirely inspired by piratical considerations, had no object in betraying him, provided that he was sufficiently well paid, and Arndt a protector, who carefully shut his eyes when those unparalleled opportunities for private gain presented themselves, which are only possible under a communist government.

Jakobsen's peculiar value to the chiefs of the Revolution was his connection with Western, particularly American, business interests, his knowledge of finance, his unfailing diagnosis of the political temper of Europe, and a practical largeness of vision, which Lenin and his coadjutors had the sense to appreciate at its proper value:

and, thanks to his Dutch-American reputation, no one associated him with the Russian Government.

The flatulent proclamations broadcast from the revolutionary headquarters in Moscow are not calculated to give any but a most erroneous impression of the mental capacity of those responsible for them, some half-dozen to a dozen men who, by unexampled nerve and diabolical cleverness in the utilization of resources, have succeeded in subjugating a vast empire, and in troubling fundamentally the institutions upon which civilization in the rest of Europe depends. Revolution may be spontaneous, the over-boiling of a nation's temper, but the stabilization of revolution and the propagation of its doctrine presupposes a very different spirit on the part of its directors from that which inspired the red fanatics, who first set upon the work of firing the palaces and putting their masters to the sword. Coolness, vision, nerve, and a knowledge of men, all these are necessary; and, as events have shown, Russia's new despots possessed these attributes in a remarkable degree. When eventually a time came when other things than butchery were needed, it was then that such men as Jakobsen, who in the first tide of the revolution had been regarded with suspicion as pure intellectuals, came into their own. Brute force was played out; there was a call for big, far-reaching ideas—and Jakobsen invented the S.I.B.V.

His immediate associates in the scheme were Arndt, Dr. Rakoff, and by a rather mysterious conjunction of circumstances, Lady Harriet. Arndt had been chosen by Jakobsen, who had plenary powers; Rakoff had been appointed by the revolutionary chiefs in Moscow (though Rakoff was nominally under his orders, Jakobsen knew that he was in reality a spy, whose duty it was to report upon his activities and the progress of the scheme from a more or less independent standpoint—and Rakoff knew

that he knew it); and Lady Harriet had been recommended to him suddenly, a few months before, by Moscow, as a person likely to be of use to him. Beyond the fact that she had shared some extraordinary Central Asian adventure with Arndt a year or two before (it was during the period that he was carving out a kingdom north of the Pamirs), and seemed to be on the most intimate terms with him, he knew nothing of her connection with the revolution, or with its chiefs, except that it must be exceedingly close, for in the whole world only nine people knew the secret of the S.I.B.V., and four of those nine were sitting in Jakobsen's room that bright sunny afternoon.

"Up to the present, we have had singularly little opposition. Everything has gone smoothly, almost too smoothly. We have got the better of Alexaieff and the Grand Duke at every turn. We have forced the Society of Nobles to work in the dark, while our activities are as plain as the sun at noonday for all the world to see. The S.I.B.V. is 'democratic,' and that blessed word quiets all suspicion. We have landed some biggish fish, and the money keeps coming in; but the biggest fish, the one that really matters, the one which is worth its weight in platinum, the one which we need to make success certain, will only nibble."

Jakobsen stopped, and surveyed his audience coolly. Suddenly one understood his immense power. He dominated his hearers. Even Lady Harriet's scoffing expression had become serious.

"As Dr. Rakoff will tell you," he continued, with a glance toward the scientist, who was fingering his straggling beard abstractedly, "our expenses are enormous and, though the subscriptions are as good as we can expect, unless we can get two million dollars from Mme. de Cheverney soon, with the prospect of more later on, we shall run the risk of failure. *We must have that money.*

A week ago, I would have sworn that I would have banked her cheque for two million dollars by now, and held her promise for three million more. She was mad keen on the S.I.B.V. . . . then. It was the greatest thing that had ever been. She saw herself as a sort of high-priestess of charity, and was going to milk every millionaire in creation. She was going to start a campaign, give S.I.B.V. balls, with the tickets fifteen guineas each, and so on and so forth. She was going to dedicate her life and fortune to it . . . then. But in a week everything has changed." Jakobsen paused. His face was set and unsmiling.

"She has not weakened over the two million she promised, has she?" Lady Harriet asked anxiously.

Jakobsen produced a letter case, and extracted from it a note in the Duchesse's handwriting.

"I received this by the second post this morning," he observed calmly: "'My dear Mr. Jakobsen, I have been thinking over our conversation of last Wednesday, and, on reflection, I do not see my way to releasing in favour of the society the very large sum of money we mentioned—anyhow for the present. I enclose a cheque herewith for Two Thousand dollars, and I am instructing my agents to pay an annual subscription of One Thousand dollars, as from January 1st next. Yours sincerely, Avril de L. de Cheverney-Bouillon.'"

"The slut!" cried Lady Harriet, jumping up. Jakobsen looked at her, and she sat down again.

"Who has been getting at her?" enquired Arndt practically.

"Her uncle, Mr. George Fennix, C.M.G., M.V.O., late Councillor of Legation at Buenos Ayres, an unusually wide-awake English diplomatist. He is the brother of one of my directors," Jakobsen answered coolly, handing

Rakoff Mme. de Cheverney's letter to read. He did this with nearly all his correspondence. It saved Rakoff the trouble of burgling the safe in the middle of the night.

"Are you sure it is not the brother?" Rakoff asked, when he had glanced at the letter. "Or the tutor? He is a good-looking young fellow, I hear, and may have more influence than you think. Young blood, hot blood!" He cackled in a lickerish fashion that made Arndt laugh.

"Vincey is all right," said Lady Harriet tersely.

"No. It is Fennix," said Jakobsen quickly. "I have proof. Winspear, the brother, is neutral. He takes no interest in anything except his horses, his yacht, his motor-racing. . . ."

"And Wanda!" put in Lady Harriet maliciously.

Jakobsen took no notice. "He has nothing to do with his sister's affairs," he pursued. "Their fortunes are entirely separate, and they never interfere with one another. I had hoped to get at Winspear through Mme. de Cheverney, but found it quite impossible. She would not help me. He cares nothing for things unconnected with his pleasure."

"Wise man!" grunted Arndt from the sofa. "What about the tutor?"

Jakobsen glanced at Lady Harriet. "He is your province, Hetty. What about Vincey?"

"Vincey is all right," she drawled. "I soon got his game out of him. He has not got a bean, and he is on the look-out for a rich wife. He asked me to help him. I admit he was rather tight at the time, but there is nothing like a drop of drink for making a man tell the truth. He rather likes me, and has taken to dropping in after the dovecote has gone bye-bye. Comes over on a bike, though how he gets back I don't know! He must be a damned good acrobat, if he did not fall off last night."

"Where does he come from, and who is he?" Arndt asked. Nothing if not thorough was Arndt: *dossiers* were a passion with him.

"He is the by-blow of an English lord and a French dancer, he says," Lady Harriet returned with her usual refinement. "He has knocked about everywhere, India, West Africa, the States. He is a hard nut, that Vincey. His father gave him a small allowance until he died, and then left him five thousand pounds. Vincey bust that in about a couple of years, and got this job through some Americans, when he had reached his bottom dollar. I have been wondering if Vincey might not be of use to us. He is no fool—and a perfect devil, when he has got a drop of drink in him. I thought he was going to kill Tuff last night."

Jakobsen glanced at Arndt, who smiled in a peculiar way.

"Oh, well! Boys will be boys," Lady Harriet said, smoothing her skirts with affected demureness. There was a shameless impudence in the gesture that reduced Arndt to roars of laughter, and made even Jakobsen smile.

"Well, I will answer for Winspear's neutrality," Jakobson said, when the German had more or less recovered himself, "and we will take it for granted that Hetty is assured of Vincey's inoffensiveness."

"If not of his innocence!" said Arndt, who liked to savour the dregs of a joke.

"There remains Fennix, and I have double proof that he is the man we are up against."

"He must be got rid of," Rakoff murmured, rolling a cigarette with great rapidity and skill.

"There, I agree with you," Jakobson said calmly. "Now listen. The success of the S.I.B.V. so far is very largely due to the fact that the press, particularly the sentimental English press, has treated it with an exagger-

ated respect. None of the papers that matter have questioned it. In a few months' time, it will be a *chose accomplie*; we shall be an institution on a firm foundation, and its success or failure from our point of view will depend on the efficiency of our organization. But at present we are not on a firm foundation—to be on that, we need a couple of Mme. de Cheverney's millions—and an adverse press campaign might quite possibly be fatal to us. If a panic set in, subscriptions would stop; to put it commercially, we should not be able to deliver the goods, and we might as well go out of business at once. In three months' time, when the foundation stone of the S.I.B.V. building in Berne has been laid, the papers can criticize to their hearts' content—but *now* suspicion would spell ruin to us.

“A week ago Fennix wrote to Noel Curtis of the *Daily Post*, in London, a letter which, if Curtis had acted upon it, would have lit the train and blown us sky-high! Colette got a look at it. She could not take a copy, but she has a good memory, and though it was pretty long, had it nearly pat. She wrote it down at once, and gave it me next day. As it happens, I know Noel Curtis rather well—Fennix does not know that—and I once did him a very good turn. I gave him the opportunity of making a very big ‘scoop’ and he has not forgotten it. I wrote explaining things a bit, said that I had heard by chance of Fennix's letter, and that Fennix had a bee in his bonnet about the S.I.B.V., one thing and another, and he is not taking any notice of Fennix's suggestions. I heard from him this morning.”

He took a letter from his case and handed it to Dr. Rakoff, who perused it and handed it back. “For this time we are all right. But what about next time? Colette came this morning. She says Fennix has written a good many letters in the past few days, and has taken to posting them himself. He is the man we have to fear.

He is the man who has put Mme. de Cheverney against us."

"He is the man we have to get rid of," interpolated Dr. Rakoff, rubbing his hands together.

"As I said before, I agree with you. But it will have to be done in such a way that there is no suspicion of . . . well, drastic intervention on our part."

"You said you had double proof that he had been interfering," Arndt remarked.

"I have. He has a spy in this house."

"A spy! Here!"

Rakoff jumped up, and began gesticulating in uncontrollable excitement. Counter-espionage was his fixed idea. Though savage and cruel, when dangerous work had to be carried out by others, he was a timid conspirator, and went in terror of his own methods being applied to himself. He was not cut out for plotting. Had he been English, instead of Russian, he would have probably been a distinguished, if crotchety, lecturer on chemistry at Cambridge, retiring, unamiable, but worth an obituary notice of a quarter of a column in the *Times*, when his pragmatical gods called him to their bosom. He never left the grounds of the villa, and spent his time in conducting chemical experiments in the pavilion he inhabited a stone's throw from the sea.

"Yes, a spy here, and you are responsible for him, Dr. Rakoff!" said Jakobsen in a low penetrating voice that made the other shudder. "It is your precious assistant Alexis, the bright young medical student from Kieff, whose cleverness you are always vaunting, your invaluable Alexis, your protégé. You, who mistrust everybody, who interfere in everything, who are never satisfied, who let us do the work and run the risks, while you hide in your laboratory and carp at all we do, you are responsible for this. If we fail now, it will be your fault—and you may

be very sure of one thing, Dr. Rakoff, and that is that the blame for failure will be justly apportioned."

"But he was sent to me by Moscow," Rakoff almost screamed, waving his claw-like hands within a foot of the other's face.

"He may have been sent to you by the devil himself," Jakobsen retorted, "but at two o'clock this morning he had an interview with Fennix in this very garden."

Arndt whistled.

"How do you know?" he asked with a grin. He had never cottoned much to the doctor, who, like many the devil calls his own, had distorted virtues of sobriety, which did not appeal to the jovial ex-king of south-eastern Turkestan.

"Sergei caught him climbing into his room. He said he had been out to meet a girl, but Sergei, who sleeps in one of the top attics, had seen a tall man, whose description tallies exactly with Fennix, getting over the wall of the orchard only a minute before."

"Where is Alexis?" asked Dr. Rakoff in a suddenly subdued voice.

"You need not worry," Jakobsen returned grimly. "He has not escaped. He is in the room above this, bound hand and foot, if you want to know."

"Have you interrogated him?" Lady Harriet asked, bending forward eagerly.

"You bet," Jakobsen replied, "but you might as well interrogate a stone wall."

Arndt laughed.

"They are always like that at first. I will make him talk. Do you remember how I made the sham envoy from Samarcand talk, Hetty? I've never known that trick to fail."

Lady Harriet did not answer. A strange voluptuous look had crept into her eyes. She was thinking of the boy

upstairs, so fair, so fresh, so young. She had often seen him helping Dr. Rakoff in his experiments, and had admired his youth and vigour, his light curling hair, his long straight limbs, his boyish look.

"How do you know the man he was talking to was Fennix?" Rakoff said suddenly. "It might have been anyone."

"I could tell by his look when I mentioned Fennix's name," Jakobsen replied curtly. "Besides, who the devil else could it have been? Do you think he would not have explained what he was doing out of his room after eleven, if he could have done so? He knows the eleven o'clock rule and the penalty for breaking it. I suppose you think I sprayed him with rose water and asked him to let me be a second father to him."

"It might have been the tutor—what's his name," Rakoff suggested feebly.

Lady Harriet laughed.

"He was certainly quite capable of mistaking Cap-Martin for Cap d'Ail last night. He would probably have believed you if you had told him Monte Carlo was Timbuctoo, but I'll wager my virtue he never climbed a wall with spikes on the top. He fell off his bicycle twice before he got on to it, and then he nearly ran into a lamp-post."

"Shamming," Rakoff muttered.

"Shamming be damned. You don't sham tight on two quarts of champagne and half a bottle of liqueur brandy!" she replied scornfully, making in this case, had she known it, a very grave error, for Vincey was one of those rare mortals upon whom the strongest alcohol has no more effect than milk and soda.

"What is the next move?" asked Arndt, filling a well-seasoned Dunhill. Though he had a hatred of England, which could not have been exceeded by that of the ex-

Crown Prince Wilhelm in his agricultural retreat in Silesia, he aped English fashions and customs with Teutonic thoroughness. Messrs. Poole, Lobb, Woodrow and Wing dressed him; Mr. Dunhill supplied his pipes; Mr. Lewis, in St. James' Street, the fragrant Guards' Mixture he invariably smoked; and a well-known chemist in the Haymarket the mild pick-me-up he was accustomed to start the day with. However, in spite of all this and a remarkably good English accent, the only people who ever took him for English were very young and inexperienced waiters, a fact which saddened him.

"There are three next moves," Jakobsen replied thoughtfully. "One is to keep Fennix quiet—I have a plan for that; another is to get the money out of Mme. de Cheverney—I have a plan for that; and the immediate one is to make Dr. Rakoff's young friend give us a little information."

Lady Harriet jumped up quickly and whispered in Jakobsen's ear, putting her arm round his shoulder. "Yes, yes," she finished eagerly. "Now, in Rakoff's place. You leave it to me. I'll make him talk if anyone can." She was transfigured with excitement and looked ten years younger.

Jakobsen glanced at Arndt, who shrugged his shoulders slightly.

"But I do not quite understand, Hetty. Why not leave it to Franz? He is an expert in such things."

"No, no," Lady Harriet cried, and she whispered again. "Now, do you see? Never mind what. You leave that to me. Have him taken over to Rakoff's and give me an hour. If I don't make him talk, that great clumsy Hun over there can try his hand." And she smiled amiably at Arndt over Jakobsen's shoulder.

"Let her have her way, Louis," Arndt said suddenly. "It will save trouble in the end. Only, Hetty, if you are

up to what I think you are, remember last time! Try and keep some control over yourself. We do not want you in that state again. You have to be cool to-night with all these people coming to your house."

"All right, all right. Hurry up, Louis! Ring and tell Sergei to take him over to the pavilion. Let them exercise him a bit. He must not be too stiff. And then tie him up again—firmly but not too tightly. I'll be over in half an hour."

"I will not have this!" Rakoff interposed excitedly. "I must talk to Alexis. I am sure there is some explanation. He was sent to me by Moscow."

Lady Harriet crossed the room to where Dr. Rakoff was standing by the window, and caught him suddenly by the beard, which she pulled until he yelled. "You mind your own business, Dr. Rakoff," she cried fiercely. "One of these days I may have to attend to you, you crab-faced bungler, and then . . ."

"Stop it, Hetty!" Jakobsen's voice came like a pistol shot, and Lady Hetty stopped.

"All right, old man," she crooned, patting the outraged scientist's cheek. "You can't help your looks. Don't you worry. Your little friend and I will get on like a pair of turtle-doves. So long, boys. I must have five minutes to myself before the *séance*."

She kissed her hand to them, and ran coquettishly out of the room.

Jakobsen rang the bell.

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Two hours later, Franz von Arndt, who was lying in a hammock, smoking and chuckling over a Willy novel, saw Lady Harriet leave the pavilion. She swayed slightly as she walked, and seemed hardly able to drag herself the few hundred yards to the house.

Slipping from the hammock, Arndt strode swiftly

across to Dr. Rakoff's lodging and entered. After two minutes he came out again. For a moment he stood on the path caressed with the shadows cast by a setting sun, trying to control himself, and was then violently sick into a bed of geraniums.

CHAPTER VI

IN WHICH THE PRIVACY OF SOME OF OUR CHARACTERS IS VIOLATED

THAT blessed half-hour before dinner, when we are either dressing, or making up our minds to begin dressing, should be sacred. Our work, if we do any, is finished; and before us stretches a fresh division of the day, as different from that which preceded it, the home-spun hours from breakfast onwards, as black is from white. This second division is even symbolised by a special uniform. I say it roundly, the half-hour which we spend in putting on that special uniform and in investing ourselves with a new set of thoughts and manners, in considering the things the day has brought forth and in speculating upon those that the evening has in store for us, should be inviolate. It is intimate and personal, a sort of mental and physical breather: and there is only one thing worse than to be robbed of that breather, and that is to be spied upon while we are enjoying it, to be caught doing Muller's exercises with our toes pointing to the ceiling, to be seen administering that one touch of rouge that is not even suspected by our best enemy, to have our secret misgiving as to the composition of the dinner menu (one of our innocent foibles is to say that we never notice what we eat) revealed to merciless inquisitors, or to be found (angels and ministers of grace defend us!) practising the telling of a new story before the looking-glass.

It is hard to be outraged thus brutally, but what will you? You must expect to pay something for the privilege of taking part in this fascinating tale. Come, reader, I

will take you by the hand, and we will wander, ghostlike, through the Villa Cheverney, between seven and a quarter to eight o'clock, prying into what does not concern us, catching our friends "mentally unbuttoned" as George Fennix would put it, ransacking those secret corners of the mind, which only get an airing at this mysterious hour, taking in fact a grossly unfair advantage of people who have as much right to the decencies and privacies of life as we ourselves have. But if you suffer from irritating little kinks in the brain, called moral scruples, you may skip this chapter, and leave me to perpetrate this outrage by myself.

As the first person we met in this story was George Fennix, we will take him first now.

He was at rest in a boiling hot bath, from which arose a faint perfume of verbenascented bath salts. He was tremendously at his ease; his thoughts disconnected and fitful, as bath-thoughts always are, and passably frivolous.

Miss Bellamy was a pretty girl . . . nice girl—granddaughter of old Sir Jocelyn Bellamy, who won the Derby way back in the seventies or eighties, and went broke later . . . terrible old rip, too. He had heard his father speak of him. What was it they had called him? Something Bellamy. "Tig" Bellamy. That was it: but why "Tig"? Some old forgotten joke. . . . Pity Miss Bellamy had not any money. She would make a good wife . . . for someone. She was a splendid manager, Avril said . . . pretty hair . . . twenty-three. He was forty-two, and, as his brother was not quite fifty, it might be twenty-five years before he came into the title, if he ever did. Expensive profession diplomacy . . . expensive place, the Hague . . . not that he was likely to get that. That was just talk. There would probably be a general post, and if he got a legation at all it would be Switzerland, as like as not. He could not stick Berne—no society.

And those dreadful Bernese patrician families, still talking of the French revolution as a recent event! He knew them. They spoke eighteenth-century French with a German accent. Besides, he was too old—nearly twenty years difference. Idiot! The southern spring getting him: that was what it was. What was he thinking about marriage for? He was a born bachelor. He had long ago made up his mind to be that unique animal, an unmarried ambassador. Hm! She had good looks, good manners, she knew how to dress, she knew how to entertain, she would never let him down. It was a pity she had no money—still he was fairly well off. Hm! But the trouble was that he did not want to marry. Anyhow, she would probably refuse him, if he were fool enough to propose. That was one comfort. Not that he had the least intention of doing so, but perhaps he had been seeing rather a lot of her. They seemed to be thrown together. Avril had said something . . . some chaff. It was the spring. After all, forty-two was no age . . . really. And he was very well preserved, had always kept fit. But not marriage! He had been born too old for that. He regarded his long limbs with approval, and began to sponge leisurely. A clock was striking the half-hour. In a flash George came back to actualities, and we will leave him wrestling with them, helped by the faithful Watson.

Seven o'clock found Mme. de Cheverney resting in her bedroom. As it is her thoughts, which were very puzzling and contradictory, in which we are interested, and not her surroundings, we will only say of her room that it was very large, very airy, furnished sparingly with a few magnificent Persian rugs and some pieces of Chinese Chipendale, which reduced collectors of such things to an unholy state of envy on the rare occasions when they were privileged to view them. She lay on a divan, piled with many gorgeous cushions, in the middle of the vast

room, a tropical islet in a polished sea, bathed in the soft radiance of a lamp in an alabaster vase on a low table at her side.

What was it, she was wondering, that was happening to her? Why had she lost that composure of mind, that philosophical "pococurantism" which carried her so easily through life? She was not ill: far from it; her health was perfect. She had nothing to worry her. And yet, that very day, she had done her level best to quarrel with Courtney about nothing, she had been over-sharp with Jérôme, she had sat on Harry Raphael unmercifully (he had certainly been an ass . . . but still . . .) and the sight of Hilda Bellamy and George losing themselves by-accident-done-on-purpose, as the children say, had irritated instead of amusing her, as it usually did.

She sighed, and stretched out her hand for a cigarette. She might as well be honest with herself, and face facts. She knew perfectly well what was the matter with her. It was Julian Vincey.

For example: why was it that she had only seen the force of George Fennix's arguments about the S.I.B.V. when they were backed up by Vincey, and not before? She had called George, in her own mind, over-cautious, cold, cynical, ungenerous, suspicious and selfish, but when he had suggested that she should ask Vincey what he thought about the S.I.B.V., and Vincey had corroborated every word George had said, she had not only been won over completely to their point of view, but she had actually written to Jakobsen at once, withdrawing her offer of two million dollars. And she had not enjoyed doing it! It was too much like breaking a promise. Again, why had she quite unnecessarily prevented Vincey playing tennis that afternoon, on the plea of there being something she wanted him to do in connection with a business matter she had entrusted to him, and then taken him out for a long

walk? Why was she planning to find out that very night the date of his birthday, so that she could give him a magnificent present, and why did she hope that it was soon? Avril asked herself these questions frankly, but found it extraordinarily difficult to find an answer. Was she in love with Vincey? If she was, it was a different kind of love from that which she had borne her husband until the lonely day when she had learnt that, though scrupulously faithful to her, he had never ceased to love another woman, and that she had never possessed his heart at all. Since his death, before Verdun, no one had attracted her in that way and she had come to think scornfully of love, as of a green sickness, innocuous to people of mature years: and yet if this extraordinary preoccupation with regard to Vincey were not love, what was it?

If she had been likely to settle this question to her satisfaction, which we doubt, her maid would have prevented it, for she entered at that moment with discreet warnings as to the flight of time.

We will now examine two hardy parasites.

Colette Brandstetter and Harry (we will take them together, but the reader must draw no unjust conclusions from our doing so) had rooms facing each other in a corridor branching off the one inhabited by George Fennix.

Their relations were cordial, familiar, frankly egotistical; and they had made a sort of treaty, by which it was recognized that they should help each other when possible, Harry by supplying Colette with any items of information connected with the household, which came to his ears, and Colette by putting in a word for Harry when the occasion offered.

Colette bullied, despised, spoilt and caressed Harry (he was so futile and so wonderfully good-looking) and Harry admired Colette (his devotion contained an exquisite ele-

ment of fear), submitted to her strangest caprices, and thoroughly enjoyed her exciting masterfulness.

Harry's original engagement as dancer-in-chief to the duchesse had been entirely due to pity inspired by his youth and general helplessness, for the scandal caused by the death of his dancing partner at the "Lola Montez" from cocaine poisoning, though he had not been in the slightest degree implicated in the affair, had resulted in the few people who bothered about him at all, fighting shy of him; and had it not been for Avril, who had danced with him once or twice, taking pity on him, he would have been left very much alone in a cold and unsympathetic world. . . .

As it was he had settled down in his new post like a fly in treacle. He did nothing all day long, for Mme. de Cheverney had not the slightest need of a professional dancer; his futility prevented his dismissal, for it would have been barbarous to have left anything so completely helpless to its own devices; he fared sumptuously; cares and worries belonged to a hated past, when there was a horrible thing, called "one's living," that had to be earned; Avril was kind to him, and gave him superb presents from time to time; Winspear was civil, when he remembered his existence, and was obliging about lifts into Nice, Monte Carlo, and so on; Jérôme took no notice of him; the servants tolerated him, for he gave very little trouble, and Colette led him by the nose, if we may use so vulgar an expression.

"Harry! Come and hook me up. Adele is not here."

Harry slipped on a brightly-coloured kimono, and crossed the passage. "Hook up," we think, must have been a manner of speaking; firstly, because ladies' dresses do not hook up nowadays, and secondly, because even if they did Colette, who was pulling on her stockings, was very far removed from the hook-up stage.

Harry sat down in an arm-chair, and lit a cigarette.

"Give me one." Colette sat up and lit one from Harry's. The fact that she wore only one garment, chiefly composed of lace, did not seem to embarrass either of them.

"Has it struck you that Avril is gone on Vincey?" she remarked, inhaling deeply.

"No," Harry replied slowly, in his rather diffident way. "Not Avril; someone else."

"Who?" Colette asked in surprise.

"Mr. Jakobsen's sister, the Baroness."

Colette laughed. "My poor boy, you must be dotty. She and Vincey have not met more than three times."

"I know, but I saw her looking at him that day we all met in Monte Carlo. She thought no one was looking. She simply devoured him with her eyes."

"What did he do?"

"Nothing. He did not see. I do not say he is in love with her, although he may be. I know nothing about that, I say she is in love with him. No one looks like that, unless they are in love."

Colette became thoughtful. Though Harry was an ass about some things, it was extraordinary how often he was right over others. He had intuition like a woman. She laughed suddenly.

"It will put Master Courtney's nose out of joint, if she is. He is silly over her."

"It is funny, isn't it?" said Harry, blowing a smoke ring. "Perhaps they have met before and are keeping dark about it."

Colette jumped.

"Harry, you are quite bright to-night. What is the matter with you?"

Harry smiled fatuously, and stroked his freshly-shaven chin.

"Are you quite sure about it?" Colette asked seriously.

"You are sure it was not just the sort of look any woman might give a good-looking man, without meaning anything in particular."

"Quite sure. She looked as if she wanted to eat him."

Colette smiled rather bitterly. She knew what those looks meant.

"Look here, Harry, are you going to be a dear, good boy and do something for your little Colette?" she asked after a moment's hesitation.

"I will always do anything for you, Colette," Harry returned simply.

"Well then, to-night, at Lady Harriet's keep as close as you can to the Baroness without appearing to do so, and if she and Vincey talk, particularly if they manage to be alone together, make it your business to overhear what they say. They will speak French probably, but you speak quite well enough now to be able to follow. I was telling Avril only yesterday how well you were getting on (Harry beamed. He was pathetically anxious to keep in Mme. de Cheverney's good graces). And I tell you what, Harry, if you will do this for me, I will share my winnings with you if there are any. They always play high at Lady Hetty's, and I feel in the vein to-night." Colette was an insatiable gambler, and she intended to risk the three thousand franc notes Jakobsen had given her for reporting the contents of Fennix's letter to Noel Curtis.

"I will do it for you without that, Colette."

"Oh, well, one good turn deserves another," she said, smiling. "Now run along and finish dressing. You may kiss me, but be careful. My face is all ready for dinner."

Harry approached her cheek, but Colette, taking his face suddenly between her hands, kissed him long and full on the mouth.

"There. Now, I shall have to do my lips again. Don't forget what I told you. Hurry up, or you will be late."

Courtney Winspear had done certain vigorous physical exercises (he was built on a generous scale, and went in terror of getting fat), bathed, and was dressing swiftly. What the devil was the matter with the place this year, he was wondering—it was not half as much fun as it usually was. There was a funny atmosphere. Avril was as nervy as she could be. George Fennix was a good sort, but his *penchant* for Miss Bellamy's society rather spoilt him as a festive companion. Vincey was all right, in fact no one could be better company, but he never seemed to be there when one wanted him. Mysterious fellow, Vincey. He had been all over the world, he seemed to know a bit about everything, and yet it was impossible to discover what he had done before he got his job as young Jérôme's tutor—a strange job for a man like him.

What about a glass of sherry? Fattening? Be damned. He had played five sets of lawn tennis, forgone tea, and done his exercises. Certainly, a glass of sherry.

What on earth did Avril want to have that Brandstetter woman about the place for? And young Harry-What's-his-name? He was willing to bet they were not up to any good. Courtney sipped his sherry while two fundamental things warred within him—a certain deep-seated conservatism, an inherent appreciation of the solid conventions upon which civilized life depends, and the doctrine of independence and non-interference, which he followed in daily life. That Brandstetter woman was an adventuress pure and simple, and yet Avril treated her as though she were a Fennix or a Cheverney-Bouillon. And it was not as though she really liked her very much. Avril was no fool. She saw through her all right. She did not miss any of her little tricks. And that awful Lady Harriet! Why were they going to stifle in her nasty stuffy flat, which she always kept five degrees too hot, when they could stay comfortably at home? They would have to

rub shoulders with a lot of second-rate people, South American *rastas*, Portuguese excellencies, Finnish barons, rag-tag and bob-tail from goodness knows where. It was a marvel to him where she came across the people she asked to her house. One never met them anywhere else: presumably they were like bats and only appeared at night. And the house itself! Its atmosphere always reminded him of a mixture of a perfumery shop and the smoking-room of a transatlantic steamer. He always had the feeling that Captain Tuff might take off his coat at any moment and serve drinks in his shirt-sleeves. The only consolation was that he would see Wanda Lewel, but that was not much consolation, now that she had given him to understand that he had not a chance. Perhaps the gods had been too kind to him. He could buy any mortal thing in the world he desired, but the one thing he desired with all his soul and body: not that he wanted to buy her—Good God! no—but he wanted her, he wanted her! Avril had said that if she did accept him, she would never understand him. That might be true. He did not care a tinker's curse. He did not want to be understood. He wanted to look at her, to worship her, to absorb that beauty, to make her life a wonder-dream such as no other woman in the world had ever known. He was one of the few men living who could give her a worthy setting—and she would not look at him. It was hard, hard!

Courtney took his coat from his valet.

"I shall be late to-night, Martin. You need not wait up. Call me at half-past seven to-morrow as usual, please."

As Miss Bellamy's thoughts were chiefly occupied with her clothes, and Jérôme's entirely with the anatomical arrangements of a model motor-car (besides Jérôme does not count, as he supped in the nursery as a properly

brought up child should) we will leave them in peace, and pass on to Julian Vincey.

That man of mystery was worried. Life was becoming rather complicated. For one thing, he was finding increasing difficulty in slipping away to Monaco, and it was vital just now that he should keep in the closest touch with headquarters. And then there was that visit to Alexis last night. It had been necessary and it seemed to have gone off all right, but it must not happen again—it was much too dangerous. He would have to find another way of communicating with him. The arrival of Herr von Arndt at Cap Martin was disquieting too. He had heard quite a lot about Arndt, besides what Alexis had told him. It looked as though they were going to make a move of some sort, and that was just what he did not want. After February the ninth, they could do what they liked, or rather what they could, but up till then he hoped they would remain inactive, and not disturb the plans of the Society of Nobles, of which the Grand Duke Peter, supposedly in America, Count Alexaieff, supposedly dead, and himself, supposedly sheep-farming in distant Patagonia, were the chiefs. The one bright spot in the rather overcast sky was Fennix's unexpected assistance. His conversation with Avril about the S.I.B.V. had been of inestimable value, for it had saved Vincey showing his hand prematurely, and that he would probably have had to have done to have prevented Mme. de Cheverney's millions going into Jakobsen's pocket, if Fennix had not opened fire for him. Was it luck, or had Fennix a motive? Somehow he did not believe much in luck where Fennix was concerned. And yet if he had a motive, what could that motive be?

The person he feared most for the moment was Lady Harriet. He had been at some pains to get to know her—witness his nocturnal frequentations of her house in Monte

Carlo, so conveniently situated for other visits in the neighbourhood—and she frightened him badly. Men he could deal with. He feared neither the quiet efficiency of Jakobsen nor the brutality of Arndt, while Dr. Rakoff he regarded as a Bolshevik bogey incapable of alarming a child; but that fury, that Messalina, that Captain Kidd in petticoats. . . . Phew! She had taken an unholy liking to him, and showed it with an effrontery which was becoming more and more embarrassing. And her incidental confidences! At thirty-four, with experience of courts, camps, war, society, travel, revolution, imprisonment, and exile, Vincey thought he knew life fairly thoroughly, but Lady Harriet had opened his eyes. Compared with her, he was a little child. She had reigned with Arndt in Central Asia, and boasted gaily of hellish atrocities, of midnight stabbings and the poisoning of friends, of tortures learnt from old Chinese books, of orgies, accompanied by every vicious extravagance known to East and West, horrors which rolled off her tongue as easily as a recital of last season's entertainments, and made Vincey blench. Though she never mentioned Arndt by name, he knew that he must be the shadowy figure "a man like a mountain, crueller than a Roman emperor of the decadence," who appeared from time to time, dimly, in the background of her talk. And she had travelled with wild tribes in parts of Africa, where no European had previously been, and spoke of strange rites, and sacrifices in dark groves. . . . There was something gloating, ogre-like, in her devilish reminiscences, that was completely inhuman, and Vincey wondered by what strange freak of nature she had quitted the broad safe path, followed by her fellows, and soared, an unclean bird of prey, into the adventurous upper air. . . .

So far, he had played his part well and she had no suspicion of him, but it had not been unduly difficult. The

difficult time would come, when she made him, as he was sure she intended, an offer to join his fortunes to hers and Jakobsen's. It was, of course, what he had been playing for, ever since he discovered her connection with the S.I.B.V. but . . . well, it would be neck or nothing then. He would not be able to avoid awkward questions by playing the rowdy buffoon and feigning intoxication; and once accepted as an associate, however subaltern, he would have to give practical proof of his zeal.

The Society of Nobles, originally formed after the revolution with a view to the restoration of the monarchy in Russia, had been driven, with the spread of Bolshevism, into a more or less defensive position; but although its original aim was of necessity temporarily obscured, it was none the less a powerful organization, and a continual source of annoyance to Moscow.

It was small, secret, very rich (it had unexpected subscribers all over the world, whose names, had they been published, would have astounded their fellow-countrymen) and its active members, recruited from many different nations, were all men of proved courage and determination, who were prepared to stick at nothing in their efforts to check and eventually to extirpate the poisonous weed, whose roots were gradually spreading across the world. They were the real counter-revolutionary party. Having no public to placate and bamboozle, they invented no high-sounding slogans. Public opinion meant nothing to them. Their purpose was simple; it was a never-ending fight with the powers of Moscow, an unsuspected, underground struggle, in which many lost their lives, in which no quarter was given or taken, in which all weapons were used. Not one person in ten thousand divined their existence nor that of the pitched battles, whose fluctuating results were occasionally published in mysterious *communiqués* only intelligible to the initiate: and only Moscow

knew how many Bolshevik schemes had been undermined, how many agents had disappeared, how cruelly their organization had been harassed by this resolute company. Vincey was one of their founders.

His present adventure, his false position in Mme. de Cheverney's household, was extremely hazardous from every point of view. Should Jakobsen or any of his gang suspect his identity, his life would not be worth an hour's purchase. The slightest slip would be fatal to him, and a slip was so easy to make. He had been greatly helped by the cosmopolitan nature of the house, and the careless, incurious habits of its inmates. He had been at once taken for granted, and no one seemed to bother their heads about what he had been or done before he descended upon them as Jérôme's tutor on the recommendation of an American newspaper proprietor, who was incidentally affiliated to the Society of Nobles and was one of its principal financial supports. But his chief danger lay in being recognized by people he had known in days gone by. What was more likely than that on the Riviera in the height of the season he should run across someone he had known fourteen years before at Oxford, for instance? Such a meeting, if it came to Jakobsen's ears, as it most certainly would, would be his death warrant.

In undertaking this particular duty, his object had been three-fold, to keep somehow, by fair means or foul, Mme. de Cheverney's money out of Jakobsen's pocket, to keep in touch as far as possible with Alexis, who, like all Jakobsen's dependants, was to all intents and purposes a prisoner, and to prepare the *coup*, which was planned for February the ninth. Through an extraordinary piece of luck (a curious affair altogether, Fennix's intervention) Mme. de Cheverney had decided at the last minute not to present the S.I.B.V. with the vast sum she had thought of subscribing, and therefore he had been spared the neces-

sity of risking the whole enterprise for the sake of preventing this one thing. So far so good. Alexis, who had only been established in Jakobsen's or rather Dr. Rakoff's service with the greatest difficulty, had been unable up to the present to do much more than keep Vincey informed of the every-day happenings at the Villa at Cap Martin: but Vincey had hopes that, thanks to the rather garrulous affection borne him by the Russian scientist, the young man would soon be able to pick up some indication as to their immediate plans. Vincey knew enough of Jakobsen to know that he would not take Mme. de Cheverney's eleventh hour defection lying down.

Vincey smiled rather grimly as he slipped his automatic into the hip-pocket of his evening trousers. Life was exciting, even if it was complicated. But he little knew what complications were in store for him!

CHAPTER VII

AN EVENING AT LADY HARRIET'S

LADY HARRIET'S apartment in Beausoleil, that steep suburb of Monte Carlo backed by the green slopes of La Turbie and the Mont des Mules, was large and well enough adapted to entertaining, although it was furnished with a meretricious luxury, which had the effect of imparting an air of unconscious rakishness to its most respectable visitors.

When the party from the Villa Cheverney arrived that evening, rather late, Lady Harriet had finished receiving, and was sitting on an *Empire* sofa in her boudoir, surrounded by half a dozen rather flashy young men whom she addressed by their Christian names, while through an open door her husband could be seen superintending the arrangement of a baccarat table in the drawing-room. In the dining-room beyond it, there stood a buffet, where three servants were already dispensing liquid and occasionally solid refreshment at top speed. There was no Prohibition nonsense about the Tuffs' entertainments, and most of the guests, judging from the number round the buffet, seemed to be aware of the fact. The air was heavily laden with cigar smoke and perfume; shrill voices rose and fell in an unceasing babble, a pianist, Hungarian and temperamental, in a distant room, played to an audience of three engaged in animated conversation, and the majority of the guests, as though mesmerised, were drifting in twos and threes towards a dark, fattish, clean-shaven man, who was sitting at a table with piles of different coloured chips in front of him.

Lady Harriet summarily dismissed her court, and rose to receive the new arrivals. She was dressed, femininely, in black velvet, and wore a magnificent diamond necklace, fastened with an unusual and rather barbaric clasp composed of a ruby, a sapphire, and an emerald, all large stones of great brilliance, set in a cluster.

Of the party from the Villa Cheverney, George Fennix was the only one, with the exception of Harry whose tranquil mood never varied, who was in the gay care-free temper that is necessary if one is to enjoy oneself amid such surroundings. Avril was nervous and out of sorts, and Winspear had made up his mind very definitely that nothing in the world would dissipate his boredom; Vincey was preoccupied, Miss Bellamy unusually silent and intent upon her thoughts, while Colette was unable to think of anything except the three thousand franc notes which were burning a hole in her little jewelled purse.

It was the first time that Vincey had seen Lady Harriet dressed in anything but the mannish tweeds she wore in the daytime or a loose Eastern arrangement, a sort of *djibbah*, which she had put on for the evening on the occasions when he had dropped in about midnight to drink and gossip. She did not look so bad, he thought, in a proper gown, and her diamonds were magnificent. Then he caught sight of the clasp. The clasp, the unusual clasp, resplendent rather than strictly beautiful, had a curious effect on Vincey. He seemed unable to take his eyes off it. After he had shaken hands, he manœuvred to get a closer look. When Avril joined Lady Harriet on the sofa, he stood behind them, his eyes riveted on the ornament. Finally, after bending forward so that he almost touched it, he turned quickly on his heel and slipped out of the room into the drawing-room. He was very white, and his hands twitched. The last time he had seen that necklace, it had encircled his mother's neck!

In all Lady Harriet's adventures, she had probably never been nearer death than at the moment when Vincey stood behind her. It was only the thought of his mission, the thought that Lady Harriet was but one of several with whom he had scores to settle, which prevented him gripping that long white neck and squeezing and squeezing and twisting until her eyes bulged out of her head, and her heart beat slower and slower and the last flicker of human consciousness showed in the hideous distorted face. . . . So that was where she got her jewels—loot from the revolution—and he remembered others she had worn. He was so agitated, so stung with memory, that he forgot momentarily where he was and muttered in Russian, clenching and unclenching his hands: "The trull! The thief! She shall pay for it, if I have to wait twenty years."

A tug at his sleeve brought him to himself. Baroness Lewel was at his side.

"Bon soir, monsieur."

As he bent over her hand, she whispered: "For heaven's sake, calm yourself."

With an effort, Vincey pulled himself together. The sight of those diamonds had nearly driven him mad.

"It is so hot here. Cannot we find somewhere cooler?" the Baroness said, and then seeing an expression of hesitation and suspicion pass across his face, added swiftly, "Come with me. I must talk to you."

A quick glance round had assured her that Jakobsen was deep in conversation with someone in a distant corner.

Vincey gave her his arm, and she led the way to a small room screened from the hall by curtains. It was used by Captain Tuff as a writing-room on the rare occasions on which that knight of industry put pen to paper. Vincey knew it well. It had been the scene of several carousals during the past fortnight. It might almost be

said that he and the furniture were on intimate terms, so often had he fallen over the chairs and feigned drunken slumber on the divan. It was empty.

Wanda drew him to a seat beside her on the sofa.

Vincey began to say something, but she broke in impetuously :

"Listen to me. We may be disturbed at any moment, and I have many things to say to you."

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George Fennix was in a holiday mood. He felt light-hearted and irresponsible, the result possibly of having received answers to some of his letters suggesting enquiries into the S.I.B.V.; for, if the truth must be told, there was nothing quite so calculated to put George in a good humour as the feeling that he had a finger in someone else's pie, and that that finger was doing a little stirring on its own account. He was not naturally meddlesome, but he was curious, and the more he saw and heard about the S.I.B.V. the more intrigued and the more suspicious he became.

He had gathered from a rather curt note that he had received from his friend Noel Curtis, that that worthy was satisfied with Jakobsen's "bona fides" and did not think George's suspicions worth investigating. Very well. George could read between the lines as well as another. For reasons of his own, Noel Curtis did not want to take the matter up. But Curtis was not the only person he had written to, and he had received letters that morning from two people, one a newspaper man at the top of his profession, the foreign editor of the *Cosmos*, the other a Member of Parliament, with a habit of asking awkward questions at awkward moments, both of whom welcomed his suspicions with almost indecent delight and asked for more. He had a shrewd idea that between them they

would provoke a good deal of critical interest in the S.I.B.V., and the thought made him smile.

He was perfectly aware that he was playing Vincey's game whatever it was, and that Vincey was living in his niece's house under false pretences, but he did not care. Avril was old enough to look after herself, he liked Vincey, and he enjoyed playing a hand in the dark.

Finding his own party the reverse of amusing (Avril, Courtney, Jakobsen and a Portuguese diplomat formed a constrained group at one end of the drawing-room, while Miss Bellamy talked to an old school friend she had unexpectedly encountered), George determined to sample the fun of the fair on his own.

After joining Captain Tuff in a glass of champagne, and being introduced to several young men, who seemed to have taken root in the immediate neighbourhood of the buffet, he made his way to the baccarat table.

As it sometimes happens when one is in a careless mood, his luck was phenomenal. In a quarter of an hour he had won twelve thousand francs, and the bank was put up to auction.

As he rose from the table, he found Colette Brandstetter immediately behind him. Poor Colette was depressed. Her three thousand francs had dwindled to a wretched hundred, which she was keeping for a final throw when that peculiar and usually fatal thing known as gambler's instinct should move her.

"You are in luck to-night, Mr. Fennix," she said, with a sad little smile.

"And you are not?"

"I could not do a thing. Cleaned out."

Colette was looking wonderfully handsome and rather pathetic. Being a man, and a temporarily irresponsible one, George felt firstly sorry for her, and then very

friendly towards her. She was very likely a good sort at heart. She had probably had a hard time in life. Who was he to condemn her? What did it matter if she had read his letter? Anyhow she was a damned pretty woman. All this floated through George's brain; which shows that when he was in an irresponsible mood, his irresponsibility bordered on mental derangement. It was lucky it did, for it was an absurdly generous, careless, irresponsible gesture, which he would never have made, had he not followed his mood blindly, which probably saved his life that night.

"Lost much?" he enquired sympathetically.

"All I have got. Three thousand," she answered shortly.

"I tell you what," George said. "I am in vein to-night. We will take a bank together and go halves."

"But I have not got any money—only a hundred francs," Colette protested.

"That does not matter. I've got lots."

George bid for the bank and got it. The fact that he had to pay a terrific price did not worry him in the least. There is nothing in the world more tiresome than a description of gambling, so we will sum up the events of the next half-hour in three words. His luck held. On relinquishing the bank, he had not the faintest idea how much money they had won, but the breast-pocket of his coat was bulging with *mille* notes.

When they had extricated themselves from the crowd, a perfumed, carmine-lipped crowd, dark women with shaven arm-pits, dark men with polished nails, a Tecla crowd, George called them, he suggested that they should find a quiet place to divide the booty.

"Let us try the writing-room. I do not expect there will be anyone there," Colette suggested with flushed cheeks. She was beginning to renew her estimate of

George. She had no idea that under that imperturbable, cynical exterior, there lay the soul of a sportsman and *galantuomo*; and with the prospective removal of her more immediate financial worries, she began to regret that she had accepted the offer Jakobsen had made her some six weeks before to act as his "agent" at the Villa Cheverney. Necessity (Monte Carlo was such a short distance from the Villa, and gambling was Colette's passion, as we know) had driven her to it, but it had gone rather against the grain, in spite of her previous exploits in that line, for she had in her own way a genuine affection for Avril, and infinitely preferred a quiet, lazy life to the doubtful excitements of espionage. But what will you, with Monte Carlo so near and fortune so fickle?

On their way, they encountered Harry Raphael, who looked extremely uncomfortable when George asked him good-humouredly why he was mooning about by himself instead of attending to his social duties. He blushed, mumbled something, gave Colette a glance of agonized appeal, and made hurriedly for the dining-room.

George laughed. "Do you think we have disturbed a rendezvous?" he said, going ahead of Colette to pull aside the *portières*, which screened the room from the hall. After a glance into the little room, he turned away quickly. "There is someone in there," he said coolly. "We'll have to find another place. Goodness knows what people would think if they saw us dividing a score or so of *mille* notes! We should probably be arrested on the spot."

He spoke naturally and lightly, but he was staggered, astounded! Had Colette seen what he had seen? Baroness Lewel in Vincey's arms, their lips joined in one never-ending kiss!

He glanced at his companion, but her face told him nothing. She was smiling slightly, her eyes were calm and untroubled, her voice was even as she said:

"Perhaps the music room is empty."

It was. The pianist, temperamental and Hungarian, had tired of his task and disappeared, the three conversationalists were conversing elsewhere, and the room, which was furnished in Moorish fashion with divans and low inlaid tables, appeared in the soft light of hanging-lamps a very suitable place for their business.

George counted the notes on one of the little tables. Colette stood watching him, her elbow on the piano, chin in hand.

"Thirty-one thousand seven hundred," he said at length, making a neat bundle of the notes. "I congratulate you, partner," and he held them out to Colette, who hesitated with her hand half out toward them.

"But you have not divided them," she said slowly.

"I never intended to divide them," he returned lightly. "I was playing for you. My luck was in; your luck was out; and if one cannot lend one's luck to a . . . friend," he emphasized the word slightly, "without being expected to make a profit on it like a tradesman, I do not know what one can do."

Colette's eyes met his. Suddenly they filled with tears, and she turned away.

"I cannot take it, not a centime!" she said hoarsely. "You're a good sort, you're a perfect dear, but I cannot take it."

George went up to her and took her hand.

"Look here, Colette," he said gaily, "I insist on your taking this money. Do you hear, Colette? I insist. I guess what you are worrying about, but that does not matter a bit. The world is a deuced hard place for a pretty woman, and there are times when other people's correspondence presents an irresistible attraction. Don't think any more about that." A deep blush mantled her cheeks, and spread over her neck and breast so firm, so white, so

full. George raised her hand to his lips and kissed it.

"You are going to take your winnings. You can call it my revenge, if you like. From now on, we are going to be good friends, real friends . . ."

Colette did not speak. She was very close to him, and the perfume of her caught him by the throat. He could hardly keep his hands from her, she was so lovely, so desirable, so frail. Her frailty was her charm. She was passionate, easy, *bon enfant*. No grand passion and haggard eyes, no heart-strings torn till every nerve revolts about Colette. Her love would be like a summer night, short, warm, mysterious, enveloping, a sensuous dream.

He knew he was playing with fire, but he did not care. He thought of Hilda Bellamy, and brushed the picture of her impatiently from his mind. He thought of his dignity, his reputation for coolheadedness, and laughed. He was enjoying himself as he had not enjoyed himself for years. After all, it is not every day that one wins nearly thirty-two thousand francs, and gives it away ten minutes later, as though it were half a crown!

If unconventional actions are the result of an exceptional mood, they should be judged more leniently than if they were the fruit of our normal temper. Not that we are called upon to judge George's action in throwing away his winnings—they were his, and he could do what he liked with them—but the strict moralist (if any such read this book) will be justified in demanding an explanation of his behaviour towards Colette.

He was deliberately provoking a dangerously emotional scene (in other words, he was flirting outrageously) with a very attractive woman of doubtful antecedents to whom he was unable to give his entire respect (with an extremely pretty woman wild horses would not have persuaded him to marry) out of pure wantonness (because it amused him).

If there is an explanation for George's disgraceful behaviour, it is the inadequate one that he was in a holiday mood: anyhow it is the only one moralists will get from me.

"Is it a bargain?" he asked, slipping the roll of notes into the hand he held, and closing her fingers round it.

Colette looked up into his face. He noticed how long and curly her lashes were, how straight her nose, with slightly expanding nostrils, how white her teeth between the red half-parted lips.

"Is it a bargain?" he repeated.

"Why are you so sweet to me?" Her voice was low, and she touched his arm lightly with her hand. "You should not do things like this. It frightens me." She paused. "It frightens me. I am not used to it. Do you understand? It makes me feel things I thought I had forgotten . . . had put away . . . hardened myself against. . . ."

"Poor child!"

Colette was very close to him. He could see the rise and fall of her rounded breasts. She raised her eyes to his, brown eyes they were, slumbrous, seductive, questioning. . . .

An amused cough sounded behind them, and George muttered "Damn!"

Lady Harriet, Avril and Hilda Bellamy were in the doorway. The two last were cloaked for departure.

"So this is where you two are hiding." Lady Harriet laughed. "Avril has a headache, and wants to go home."

"If Mr. Fennix and Mme. Brandstetter do not want to go yet, I can go home with Avril, and we can send the car back," Miss Bellamy put in dryly. "Mr. Vincey is coming back with Mr. Winspear in his two-seater."

"I am quite ready," said George, "if Mme. Brandstetter is."

"Perfectly," she said with composure. "I will go and get my cloak."

On the way to the bedroom, which had been set aside as a ladies' cloakroom, Colette passed Lady Harriet's boudoir. The door was slightly ajar, and rather to her surprise she saw that a small table with sandwiches and drinks had been laid there. For her own party, Colette thought; so that they would not have to fight round a crowded buffet to get something to drink before they left. But how unlike Lady Hetty, who was anything but given to thoughtful attentions!

Suddenly a figure crossed her line of vision, and she stopped. It was Jakobsen. He took up a small decanter of whisky from the table, pulled out the stopper and quickly poured the contents of a tiny phial into it, put back the stopper, and left the room by the other door. The whole operation had not taken fifteen seconds. What in the name of heaven was he up to, Colette wondered? It must be remembered that Colette was not by any means fully in Jakobsen's confidence. She had certainly acted as his agent in the matter of the letter, for his instructions had been to discover the nature of Fennix's correspondence at all costs, and she reported faithfully on all that happened at the villa, but beyond that she knew nothing definite of his activities. She supposed not unnaturally that he and Lady Harriet were feathering their nests under cover of the S.I.B.V. and that they were afraid of Fennix, the brother of one of the directors, exposing them. Fennix's letter, though it referred at length to the secret political possibilities of the scheme, distinctly leant itself to this explanation. Colette thought quickly. If the drinks were for them, Fennix was the only one who would drink whisky. Winspear and Vincey were not there, and neither Avril, Hilda nor herself even touched it. It was meant for Fennix then.

Quick as lightning, she slipped into the room, emptied the little decanter into a flower pot, rinsed it out with some soda-water from a syphon, and filled it with sherry from a decanter on the table.

Then, after fetching her cloak, she rejoined the others, who had not moved from the Moorish music room.

Avril had heard of George's sensational bank, and was asking him about it.

"But how much did you win?"

"About half as much as people say I did," he answered with a smile.

"Where do you keep it?" queried Lady Harriet. "A woman would put it in her stocking."

"Oh, I cannot tell you that!" returned George, laughing. "But I have found a very safe place for it, the best possible place!"

"So it is a secret, your safe place?" enquired Hilda, who with robust common sense had decided not to admit the immediate suspicion that had entered her mind, when they had surprised George and Colette conversing with such apparent intimacy.

"A profound secret," George replied.

"Well, if you will go so early," said Lady Harriet, moving towards the door, "have something before you go. I told them to put sandwiches and stuff in my sitting-room."

"There you are," she said a moment later, as they followed her into the boudoir, "there is whisky for you, Fen-nix. You will like it better than this champagne: it is a ladies' brand. Or there is sherry or port."

She had calculated upon the fact that being an Englishman—and therefore educated in drinks—he would consume anything rather than sweet champagne, port, or sherry at that hour.

Avril refused to have anything, Miss Bellamy crunched

a sweet cake, Lady Harriet filled two glasses of champagne for herself and Colette, and George emptied his little one-peg decanter into a glass and filled it up with soda-water.

Avril sank into a chair, and Colette stood near her, sipping her champagne, and watching Fennix and Lady Harriet across the table. The latter, glass in hand, was regarding Fennix intently.

George raised his glass to his lips, but stopped short of drinking. "What has happened to Courtney?" he asked casually, lowering his glass.

"He is losing his money at baccarat," Avril replied indifferently.

George raised his glass again, but put it down and began feeling for his cigarette-case. An inaudible sigh escaped Lady Harriet.

"I have not seen Vincey all night," he said mendaciously, striking a match.

"Mr. Vincey was talking to Mr. Jakobsen just now," Hilda Bellamy remarked.

"Interesting fellow, Jakobsen," said George, with a glance at Lady Harriet. "Don't you agree with me?" he added coolly.

"Very interesting," Lady Harriet answered rather hoarsely.

"Travelled, well-informed, intelligent fellow," George said, and drank.

"Hmph!" He lowered his glass, then raised it to his nostrils. Lady Hetty's eyes were glued on him. "Somebody . . ." he began, when his eyes met Colette's. She put her finger swiftly to her lips and nodded reassuringly—she was standing behind Avril's chair. No one in the world was quicker at taking a hint than George. He glanced casually in Lady Harriet's direction and met her fascinated gaze. He took another sip from his glass.

"I was going to say that somebody had made a mistake about this being whisky, but I think it is all right."

And he swallowed the remainder.

No one spoke.

Avril was leaning back in her chair with her eyes half-shut. Hilda was examining a Chinese figure on the table by her. Colette was watching the scene with her heart in her mouth. Had she rinsed out the little decanter properly? Lady Harriet was leaning against the end of the sofa, one hand playing nervously with the tassel of a brocade cushion.

"How's the head, Avril?" George asked, inhaling cigarette smoke. Sherry and soda was not his favourite drink.

"Not very grand. We will go now, if you are ready."

When it came to George's turn to say good-bye, he thanked Lady Harriet for a charming evening, and added: "Funny pungent taste, that whisky of yours has. It is rather good, though. You must give me the name of your wine merchant."

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Silence can be wonderfully expressive. Avril, Hilda, Colette and George—a rejuvenated George, not that he had ever lost a certain venturesome school-boyishness, in spite of his diplomatic airs and graces, with his leg pressed against Colette's, a responsive leg, hers, in the darkness of the big Isotta—did not utter a word during the short run out to the Villa Cheverney. Avril's head was felt, rather than known, to be an excuse. It was the sort of head that duchesses with tawny hair and the Brunhilde carriage have when they cannot be bothered any longer. A head that has to be taken or left, as inconsequent as ambassadorial indisposition.

Hilda was keeping an open mind about George. She liked George, and she liked his admiration, and she liked

his successful career, and she liked the Hague, and she liked the idea of being the wife of an envoy-extraordinary and minister plenipotentiary, it gave one a background (Hang it all! Why should she not be human, if she is the only really praiseworthy person in this story?), but if he had been flirting with Colette—well, he was a nasty old man, and Colette was welcome to him! Guy Rattray, dear, stupid, jolly old Guy, whom she had known ever since she was a kid, an international lawn tennis player, and the heir to such a nice baronetcy, not very old perhaps (Rattray's Ginger Ale), but very, very solid, had just arrived in Beaulieu for six weeks and . . . In fact George had better mind his p's and q's. You cannot come it over the new generation by being a godson of Queen Victoria and on the committee of the Marlborough.

Cool and spacious, restful, after Lady Harriet's crowded flat, was the long room they entered. A wood fire burned in an open fireplace, and the air was filled with the scent of roses from large bowls on the tables. They stood about in the vague way one does, when there is nothing to say, and no one wants to go to bed. George lit a cigarette and mixed himself a whisky-and-soda from a tray that had been left out for them.

"It is all right, Avril; I am not taking to drink," he observed conversationally. "You would not believe it, but Lady Harriet does not know the difference between Johnnie Walker and sherry from the grocer round the corner."

"Was that why you made such a face?"

Avril threw her cloak over the back of the sofa, and sat down. Hilda, a tall, slim, boyish figure, remained standing, her elbow on the corner of the mantelpiece, gazing at the smouldering logs on the hearth. Colette put her jewelled purse—one of the few arch-ducal presents that remained—on the top of a revolving bookcase,

and took a cigarette from a silver box. George sipped his drink, wondering how he could get a word with Colette. The sherry and soda business was a complete mystery to him, but she apparently knew something about it.

"Who or what is 'Ternine'?" asked Miss Bellamy suddenly, unexpectedly. . . .

"It sounds like a patent medicine," Avril said, "or is it a riddle?"

"Ternine," George murmured. "Ter . . . !" He put his glass down carefully on the tray. "Why do you ask that, Miss Bellamy?"

Something in his voice attracted her attention. She looked up and across at him.

"I only wondered," she said, smiling. "There were two Englishmen there to-night. I do not know if you noticed them, and I heard one say to the other, 'I am sure it is Ternine—it must be Ternine,' and the other said, 'It is impossible, it cannot be Ternine!' As they seemed to get quite excited about it, I wondered who or what Ternine was, that was all."

George said nothing. It was Prince Ternine that he had seen fifteen years before in the Winter Palace at Petersburg talking to Count Alexaieff . . . God in heaven! It was Prince Ternine, the son of Prince Ternine, whom he had seen talking to Count Alexaieff outside the Café de la Paix! That was who Vincey was! That was that lean brown man's real name. It must be so. And somebody, some stray guests of Lady Harriet's had recognized him. Englishmen. Vincey must have been a long time in England to speak English so well. He had probably been educated there, for he spoke it just like an Englishman, not like a foreigner, who speaks "perfect English." . . .

The plot was thickening with a vengeance!

"There was an old man called Prince Ternine, who used to come and see me act in Vienna, before the war," Colette remarked indifferently. "A Russian, very rich, a nice old man. But he is probably dead by now. I think I shall go to bed."

She yawned, glided across the room—she was wonderfully graceful, Colette, and she knew how to walk, an art most women ignore; they think it enough to be able to dance—kissed Avril, gave Hilda a friendly left-hand squeeze, nodded smiling to George, and observed characteristically from the doorway:

"How nice it is not to have a husband, when one is tired."

"Guy Rattray is staying at the Bristol at Beaulieu, Avril," Miss Bellamy said, when Colette had gone. She resumed her former pose, elbow on mantelpiece, but her eyes were no longer lowered. "I have asked him over to lunch and lawn tennis to-morrow. You will play, won't you? Or shall I get another woman in the morning? If you will play there will be a men's four, Mr. Fennix, Guy, Courtney and Mr. Vincey, and we two to make a mixed double."

"I am not certain," Avril replied, after a moment's hesitation. "I may be busy. You had better get Sheila Duggan. She is staying at the Bristol in Beaulieu, so Mr. Rattray can bring her over."

"You must not count on me," George put in. "I shall probably have to go over to Nice for the day to see about rooms for Fennix and my sister-in-law at the Negresco."

"You can do that in the morning," Hilda replied in the patient, reasonable, don't-let-us-have-any-nonsense-please voice people use when they are determined to corner you, the voice which is calculated to make the mildest man curse like a bargee (to himself). "You can have the car

at any time you like. Nice is only twenty minutes from here, or twenty-five. If you spend an hour there you can be back in two hours from leaving here."

George was not the man to let himself be cornered by a girl of twenty-three.

"I rather thought of asking Mme. Brandstetter to come over there to lunch. They have a new chef at the Ruhl, who is said to be a *cordon bleu*. So you see, if I do that, I shall not be able to play."

Avril, who was the personification of good nature, and cared very little about Hilda's lawn tennis fours, which seemed to her to be played with quite unnecessary seriousness, looked up smiling approval.

"That is very kind of you, George. Colette will love it. I am so glad you like her. I was afraid at first you did not. I am always glad when people take to Colette. She is a great dear when you get to know her, and she has had an awfully hard time of it, one way and another. You take Colette into Nice for the day. Harry will take your place."

"Harry!" Hilda cried contemptuously. "Avril, are you mad? Harry plays *pat-ball*. He would be no use in a set with Guy Rattray, who plays at Wimbledon!"

"Then telephone to Mr. Rattray to bring another man, dear."

Avril's voice was bored and final—not peremptory, just final. The subject dropped, dead as dead.

"I am off to bed," Miss Bellamy announced. "Hullo! Colette has left her purse. I'll take it up to her."

George leant over the bookcase to give it to her. Hilda stretched out her hand for it at the same moment. Between them, they knocked it on to the floor. The bookcase was a tall one, the floor parquet. The purse pitched on its clasp, which sprang open, and vomited thousand-franc

notes, a big fat wad of them, to be exact, thirty-one and eight hundreds.

"Good Heavens!" Miss Bellamy exclaimed. "Fancy carrying thousands of francs like that. . . ."

She stopped suddenly, and George, who was picking them up from the floor, felt as though someone were driving a gimlet into the back of his head. When he had made a neat bundle of them (for the second time that evening) and had replaced them in the purse, he found the two women looking at him curiously.

"Mme. Brandstetter's purse may have been the best possible place for your winnings, Mr. Fennix," Hilda said coldly, "but it was hardly the safest. Good night."

George, purse in hand, watched her leave the room. It was a dignified exit, and no one in the world can be more dignified than a young lady whose feelings have been outraged.

Suddenly he heard an unusual sound as though someone were choking. It was Avril. Her head was buried in a sofa cushion, and her shoulders shook. Bit by bit, indistinct sounds became words.

"George! Dear George! Uncle George! Oh, how funny! I shall die of laughing in a minute. Colette! Naughty Colette! And we all thought you disapproved of her. Oh! Oh! Poor Hilda. What a shame making a stalking horse of her! I do not wonder the poor child is furious! You wicked old man! Oh, how funny!"

George sat down in a chair facing her.

"When you have pulled yourself together, Avril," he said with dignity, "perhaps you will allow me to explain. . . ."

Mme. de Cheverney wiped her eyes, and tried in vain to control the twitching of her lips.

"Don't, George, don't! I cannot bear any more. I have not laughed so much since Courtney stole Mrs.

Hylton-Banbury's wig, and she had to come down to dinner with a scarf round her head—and that was twenty years ago."

"The explanation is that I was playing for Mme. Brandstetter. She had never taken a bank in her life. So I took it for her."

"Of course, dear, of course. But it was a pity you did not say that at first, instead of talking of the safe place you had found for your winnings! It gave Hilda a wrong impression. But I understand perfectly—and will explain to her. Are you going to wait up for Courtney and Julian (the name escaped her unawares)? I am going to bed. I will give Colette her winnings. *Bon soir, bonne nuit, vieux satyr!*"

CHAPTER VIII

VINCEY'S RECONNAISSANCE

OF the many things Wanda said to Vincey—an open floodgate, that talk, and we have seen how it ended: women were triumphant that night, and gave no quarter—the most important thing was her tale of how Vincey, prowling in the garden, had been taken by Jakobsen and his friends for Fennix, whose designs they were anyhow only too ready to mistrust, and how the diplomatist bore a dangerous load of suspicion, which was not rightly his. Vincey, of course, had not known that; and it gave him furiously to think. Wanda did not tell him that young Alexis had been caught by Sergei on his return to the house after meeting him, for the simple reason that she did not know it. She thought that her eyes alone had seen the shadows move under the trees.

Vincey bit his finger.

It was no bad thing that they should suspect Fennix . . . Fennix as a busybody, a more or less harmless meddler in Jakobsen's affairs, made good cover for him. But supposing they began to think Fennix really dangerous, and got nasty about it. . . . At all costs he must see Alexis again. The whole situation had changed, now that their suspicions rested on Fennix, and he had Wanda as an ally. She would make an invaluable go-between. With her and Alexis, his intelligence service was complete. But he would have to see Alexis himself, and at once. One more visit to the villa, ten minutes with Alexis, and he need worry no more over that end of the business. There were a dozen ways in which Wanda could communicate with him.

He felt an itch for action.

For a time, Jakobsen held him in conversation—intelligent nothings with a purpose, intentions they might be called—and then he saw Lady Hetty making unobtrusively in their direction, stopping to speak first to one, then to another—Lady Hetty, with his mother's diamonds! A third person joined them, and Vincey, with a half-word of excuse, slipped into the crowd. He mingled with the throng round the buffet for a moment, and then passed through the door into the hall, found his hat and coat in the cloakroom, and escaped into the street as the clock struck the quarter before eleven.

A passing tram took him to Monaco. He had acted on impulse. It was true there was urgent need to see Alexis, but to-night was the worst possible night with Jakobsen abroad, and Rakoff and the German possibly waiting up for him. Wanda had said that the garden of the villa at night was about as safe as the reptile house at the Zoo with its inmates at large; but that did not deter him somehow. The fact was that anything was preferable to staying another second under Lady Harriet's roof. He still felt sick from the shock of seeing those diamonds round her neck—Messalina flaunting a holy relic.

And his talk with Wanda had not been calculated to calm him. A bolt from the blue, it was; and he was not certain yet whether it was a blessed miracle or a damnable complication.

But he would have gone home with Winspear, as had been arranged, had not Lady Hetty sidled across the room, speaking first to one, then to another. He guessed she had been going to ask him to stay after the others had gone. She probably wanted to make a bargain with him. So he ran away. He could not trust himself to-night. He might lose control and wreck everything.

He was not expected, and it was a minute or two before the door of the tall, dilapidated house was opened. A big, bearded man, in his shirt-sleeves, holding a cheap oil lamp, stood in the passage. He raised his eyebrows, but said nothing, as Vincey helped him bolt and bar the door.

In silence they mounted the staircase to a large room on the first floor. It had once been a drawing-room, and was furnished in the ornate style of thirty years ago. Shabby. Some cold meat, a pie, and an uncorked bottle of wine stood on a round table in the middle of the room.

"I would offer you some supper, Boris, if I were not sure that you had already dined. Will you have a glass of wine? It does not come from the cellars of the Yacht Club, but it is respectable."

"Nothing, thanks, sir," Vincey answered, making straight for a large cupboard or press at the end of the room. "I am in a hurry to-night."

"It is a curious thing," the other continued, watching Vincey fossicking in the cupboard, "that of all the distressing changes involved in that not unknown historical event, the fall of an empire, the only one to which I really cannot accustom myself is to drink indifferent wine instead of good—which shows that I am not yet the perfect philosopher. By the way, Francis Hanbury is in Nice. I saw him to-day. For safety's sake, I hid behind a newspaper *kiosk* in the Place Massena—not that there was really much danger of him recognizing me in this Tolstoi beard. Still he is a sharp-eyed parishioner, that one."

"Hanbury!" grunted Vincey from the cupboard. "I don't like the look of that."

"And may one ask what sort of an evening party you are going to?" the big man asked, as Vincey pitched some dark, greasy garments on to the sofa, and began to strip.

"Cap Martin, sir. I must get in touch with Alexis,"

and he gave the other a résumé of the evening. Though he omitted certain details, it was a fair enough description of what had occurred.

"For God's sake, be careful, Boris, I shall not rest until you are back. You will promise not to take more risks than are absolutely necessary, won't you?"

"Your Imperial Highness can trust me," Vincey replied. "But I may be late. I may have to hang about in the bushes until nearly dawn. One never knows."

The Grand-Duke shivered. "You are a brave man, Boris. Have you got everything?"

Vincey smiled as he laid his pocket-pistol on the mantelpiece and took one of a much heavier calibre from a drawer.

"Armed to the teeth. Automatic. Hunting-knife. Also an electric torch, and a full-length black mask, to complete the picture. You see if the coast is clear, sir, while I get out the boneshaker."

A quarter of an hour later, Vincey had passed under the crag of Roquebrune, and was pedalling along the road towards Cap Martin.

Save for an occasional motor-car with imperious headlights, the road was deserted. A couple of young Italians, singing, and an Englishman, in evening dress under a light overcoat, striding towards Monte Carlo—after spending the evening in some villa in the neighbourhood, Vincey guessed—were the only pedestrians he encountered after leaving the houses.

Shortly before reaching the inn known as the Faisan Doré, he turned down a lane to the right. Fifty yards down, after he had made sure that no one was about, he hid his bicycle among some thick bushes, and continued his way on foot. The lane steepened. Two turns brought him to the orchard wall. A minute later, he was on the other side. It was not a difficult wall for an active man

to climb at his leisure, he reflected, but it was the devil of an obstacle if he were pushed for time; if, for instance, it were between him and safety, and he had Jakobsen and his friends at his heels. It was, of course, useless attempting to get hold of Alexis until Jakobsen had returned from the party and the house was quiet, but there was no harm in making a reconnaissance. The previous night, he had not penetrated further than the edge of the lawn, where Alexis had been awaiting him.

Luckily for Vincey, he was one of those people who can see in the dark like a cat. He moved forward carefully, keeping in the densest shadow, but he had not gone ten paces when he stopped short. A thin strand of wire, knee-high, stretched across his path. Vincey knew what wire like that meant. The slightest contact would give the alarm, and bring a hornet's nest about his ears. He stepped over it gingerly, only to find more wire further on, cunningly hidden in undergrowth. The approach from the orchard was not a healthy one, it seemed—he must try a fresh cast. The orchard sloped down to a ragged hedge bounding an olive grove, which ran parallel to the garden of the villa. The hedge had a gap, but the olive grove was separated from the garden by a high wall. Quite hopeless, that: the wall was twelve feet or so high, and there was not a crack in the masonry for a foot or hand hold.

The ground shelved steeply to the cliff. Vincey followed down it, and peered over the edge. Thirty feet below him lay a patch of white sand among the rocks, which fringed a miniature bay. In a similar bay to the left, round the corner, so to speak, and out of sight, must be the bathing jetty of Jakobsen's villa. He had heard it spoken of. Vincey had his affair. A scramble down the cliff, and the rocks led to the adjoining bay.

The climb down the cliff was easy enough, but the rocks

were slippery with slime and seaweed and made bad going. He went slowly and carefully, taking his time.

As he reached the point between the two coves, he was arrested by a sound of someone moving about within a few yards of him. He stood stock still and held his breath. Two massive rocks reared themselves immediately in front of him. The sound came from the other side.

"Teufel! But it is heavy," a voice said in German; and then in Russian with a strong German accent: "Have you got the anchors, Sergei?"

Vincey crept forward and peered between the rocks. He could see the end of the jetty, a boat, a broad, heavy affair such as fishermen use, and a small wiry-looking man bending over some big dark object on the ground. The other man was out of sight.

"This one is fast." The visible man was speaking in a hoarse whisper, an uncultivated voice but in true Russian. "Stay where you are, sir, while I fasten the other."

He rose and moved a couple of paces, which put him out of Vincey's range of vision. What was it he had been bending over? The night was pitch-black and Vincey could not make out what it was. Was it a sack? It looked like one, but what the devil were they fastening anchors to a sack for? To sink it, of course, or rather to keep it sunk. That was obvious. But what on earth did the sack contain? What was it that was so incriminating that it had to be sunk by stealth in the middle of the night?

Presently the other man, a big, heavy fellow, hove in view and began pulling in the boat.

"You are sure it is sufficiently weighted, Sergei?"

"Try and lift it single-handed."

The big man tried.

"We'll have to roll it in. You hold the boat."

"Steady, steady!"

There was a dull sound, a thud, as the object, whatever it was, fell into the bottom of the boat.

"*Christus!* What a noise! Do you think it is all right, Sergei?"

"There is no one about, sir. I searched both sides of the cove when I first came down. Besides no one comes here."

"I think I will just take a look round all the same. We do not want to run any risks. It would never do for some wandering tourist or a fisherman to carry home a tale of two men ridding themselves of a corpse in the middle of the night." A low laugh accompanied the pleasantry.

Vincey, who had already donned his mask, drew his automatic from his pocket, and loosened his hunting-knife in its sheath. If Arndt, for he guessed the burly man was Herr von Arndt, discovered him, he would shoot him out of hand, and trust to bringing down the other man as he came to his companion's assistance—then he would escape somehow. . . .

"As you like, sir, but there is no one about, and we do not want to hang about too long, with this fishes' food on our hands."

Arndt hesitated. He was within three paces of Vincey, and in turning from the boat he looked straight at him. Vincey's heart beat faster, and his finger crooked round the trigger of his pistol. Was it possible he did not see him? But he did not. In the darkness Vincey's black clothes and mask melted into the background of sombre rocks. Arndt turned back to the boat.

"Very well, then, do you row. A couple of hundred metres out, the water is deep as deep."

The oars were muffled, and the boat made hardly a sound as it stole into the night.

As soon as they were a fair distance from the shore,

Vincey slipped from his hiding place, ran softly down the jetty and crossed a strip of beach to a flight of stone steps, which obviously led to the garden.

The idea of ambushing them crossed his mind (it was quite within the ethics of this ruthless game) but that would not get him much further. Jakobsen and Rakoff would still be left, and more than ever on their guard.

Who was the dead man? Was it Alexis? Had he made some slip and been discovered? Or was the corpse the grisly result of some quarrel among themselves? Jakobsen, he knew from Alexis, had a bodyguard of half a dozen ruffians commanded by Sergei. Vincey's blood ran cold at the thought that the sack might contain the body of Alexis. If it did, and it would not be long before he knew, he would see to it that the boy was properly avenged. God help the murderer when he got his hands on him!

At the top of the steps, he stopped to consider his position. The lower part of the garden, where he found himself, had been allowed to run wild, and presented excellent cover for a watcher. For a moment he thought his best plan would be to conceal himself among the bushes and see in which direction Arndt and Sergei went when they returned from their gruesome expedition; then his eye was caught by a light, forty or fifty yards away, shining through the trees. What was that, he wondered? The villa was four times that distance away, straight inland. Of course, it was the pavilion, where Dr. Rakoff lived and made his experiments. It was a one-storied wooden building, surrounded by a verandah, covered with creepers; and contained one big room, Dr. Rakoff's laboratory and workroom, a small bedroom, and a tiny kitchen. The light came from the big room.

Vincey approached warily, keeping a sharp lookout for

wire. He was in mortal fear that the verandah would creak, but it was strongly built, and his black sand-shoes made no sound as he crept along it.

Not only was the window uncurtained, but one side of it was open! Evidently, the inmate had been feeling the heat—not unnatural as the night was close, overcast, and full of thunder.

Vincey crouched under the window, listening with both ears, and hoping to get a look into the room. There was complete silence save for the faint scratching of a pen as it ran across the paper. He could hear it clearly, and guessed that the writing-table was immediately under the window. After some minutes there was a cough, and then the sound of a chair being pushed back. Suddenly, the other half of the window was pulled open, and someone looked out. Vincey held his breath. His head was within a foot of the hands resting on the sill. The beam from the window fell clear of him, half obscured by the elongated shadow of a man. Luckily, it was but a swift glance into the darkness. There was another short cough and footsteps retreated across the room. A door opened.

"Gustaf!" cried a voice, a rasping, croaking voice.

Vincey raised himself very quietly and risked a glance into the room. It was empty. The writing-table was immediately beneath the window, as he had guessed: on it a paper covered with writing that was still wet. The greater part of the room, which ran nearly the whole length of the pavilion, was arranged as a laboratory, but there was a round table, covered with books, a couple of arm-chairs, and a big stove such as one often sees in Germany, but rarely in France, reaching nearly to the ceiling. No wonder he wanted the window open, Vincey thought. The stove gave out a terrific heat, and in spite of the open window the room was like an oven.

His eyes fell on the paper on the writing-table—and his heart nearly stopped!

It was a list of names and addresses written in Russian; and the first name was that of the principal Bolshevik secret agent in Europe, a man who was wanted by the Society of Nobles as badly as any criminal was ever wanted by Scotland Yard. It was a list of Moscow's secret agents.

"Gustaf!" The voice sounded from the passage, a corner of which Vincey could see through the half-open door.

There was no time to be lost. Vincey put one leg over the sill and snatched the paper from the blotter on which it lay.

"Gustaf!" The voice was outside the door. Vincey had just time to slip down on the far side of the window before Dr. Rakoff, for Vincey guessed it must be he, came back into the room, muttering angrily to himself.

"Lazy, good-for-nothing" and stronger expressions came to his ears as he crept along the verandah towards the steps leading to the garden.

His haste to get away before Dr. Rakoff discovered his loss nearly proved his undoing, for he all but ran into Arndt and Sergei, who suddenly appeared round the corner of the building. Quick as thought, he blotted himself against the wall and they passed within six inches of him. Arndt's coat actually brushed him. He smelt of cigars.

They entered the house, and, as Vincey passed like a ghost into the garden, he heard Dr. Rakoff's voice raised in shrill complaints against the truant Gustaf.

Vincey's wisest plan would have been to have escaped the way he had come, but he was too anxious about Alexis. At all costs, he must discover what had happened to the boy.

Keeping in the shadow, he made swiftly for the house.

On his right lay a small artificial lake with a miniature boathouse. As there are times when boathouses make useful hiding-places, Vincey explored it and saw by a flash from his electric torch that it contained a punt and a small canoe, both of which looked as though they had not been used for months. The interior of the boathouse was as dark as a pit. He spent a minute or two examining the place and its possibilities from the point of view of concealment and then turned to go. On entering he had pulled the door to, but had not latched it. Suddenly he saw that it was opening very slowly, inch by inch.

Vincey watched this phenomenon breathlessly. When it was open nine inches or so it stopped, and he could imagine some exterior watcher peering into the darkness. He guessed that someone, some guard or ranger, had seen him enter and was investigating. He also guessed that the individual in question was not certain whether his eyes had played him false, for if he had been sure that there was a marauder in the boathouse, he would either have waited outside and caught him as he came out or else rushed the place—a nasty job for a man by himself, but much more likely to be successful than the method he was employing. There might, of course, be two men, but Vincey thought it unlikely. The door opened another six inches, then another six. Vincey stood against the wall, behind the door, biding his time. He was very carefully poised and carried no weapon in his hand. The door was three quarters open, when a head, bent forward, peering into the darkness, became visible.

Smack!

Vincey's fist shot out. He was a good boxer and he put every ounce of his twelve stone behind the blow. The man crumpled up without a sound and Vincey pounced on him. But he never moved. It had been a clean knock-out. Dragging him quickly into the boathouse, he shut

the door and flashed his electric torch on him. He was one of Jakobsen's bodyguard, a fierce-looking, lightly-built fellow, very dark, with a long, narrow head. There was a look of the Arab about him. In two minutes, he had been scientifically gagged, and bound with the painter of the punt. His pockets disclosed nothing but a packet of cheap cigarettes, a box of matches, and a loaded Mauser pistol, which Vincey pitched into the lake.

"There, my friend," he murmured, "you will do for a bit, but I wonder how many of your pals are about."

Very cautiously, he opened the door and stole out into the garden, but he had not gone ten yards before he dropped flat behind a bush. There was somebody coming along the path—two people. A voice, Arndt's, reached him.

"It is absurd, my dear Rakoff, quite absurd. You must have mislaid it. You said that someone might have got into the room by the window while you were out of it, three-quarters of a minute at the most. If that had been the case, we should have caught him as we came up. He could not possibly have escaped."

"Yes, yes," the other broke in, "there was just time."

They stopped on the path. They were about three yards from the bush behind which Vincey was hiding and about ten from the boathouse.

"Personally, you know," said Arndt, good-humouredly, "I do not believe in your mysterious thief at all. I believe you simply put the paper away somewhere in a fit of absent-mindedness."

"Absent-mindedness! Do you realize what the paper was? It was a full list of our European agents with their *noms de guerre* and their addresses. The only other copy is in Moscow. I was making this one so that Jakobsen should be able to carry on my work if anything should happen to me. This Alexis business has made me nervous,

I can tell you. I can hardly believe now that he was a spy."

A cold shiver ran down Vincey's back.

"Well," Arndt replied, obviously rather impressed, "if there was anyone, which I still doubt, I promise you he will sleep as deep as Alexis to-night, for he cannot escape from this garden. Sergei is now guarding the jetty, and there is anyhow a man on either side of the house."

"In case the Englishman should come again," Dr. Rakoff said slowly.

"Fennix! No, most excellent doctor. Mr. Fennix's goose is cooked, as the English say." Vincey started. What fresh devil's business was this? "An unfortunate incident has occurred by now at the party Hetty is giving this evening. Mr. Fennix has died suddenly of heart failure—that is, unless anything unforeseen has happened. In spite of what is generally believed to the contrary, there is a poison which leaves no trace. I have a little, a very little of it. It is an Indian poison and I got it in South America. It is one we keep for emergencies. Hetty or Louis will have doctored Fennix's glass of champagne and Mr. Fennix's aristocratic relations will go into mourning. It kills in ten seconds and no post-mortem will reveal anything that is inconsistent with death from natural causes. No; the extra precautions are mine. Louis has got Fennix on the brain and puts everything down to him. I do not say he is not right—he may be—but between ourselves I am not quite satisfied. I am inclined to think that Fennix is an incident, an accident, if you like, and that there is someone else here, someone infinitely superior to Fennix, a thousand times more dangerous, working against us, though, thanks to having been kept kicking my heels in Constantinople and Angora all this time over the Turkish affair, instead of being on the spot, I have not an idea who it is."

"I believe it is that young tutor, Vincey. I have always suspected him," Rakoff said vindictively.

"Maybe. But we cannot stay here talking all night. We will see if Louis has got back and then turn out the pack to search the grounds for your bandit."

"Supposing he is in the boathouse!" Dr. Rakoff suggested fearfully, catching Arndt by the arm.

"If he is, we will soon have him out," the other replied imperturbably. "Where the devil is Yussuf? He ought to be about here somewhere. Never mind! I guess I can manage one non-existent bandit by myself."

Vincey could not help admiring Arndt's courage as he walked coolly up the little path which led to the boathouse. Dr. Rakoff followed him hesitatingly. He was a timid conspirator.

With a kick, Arndt sent the door flying and dashed into the place, revolver in hand.

Vincey did not wait. Slipping from behind his bush, he made at top speed across the lawn in the direction of the house. From a confused sound of guttural curses, intermingled with shrill enquiries from Dr. Rakoff, he guessed that Arndt had fallen headlong over Yussuf and measured his length on the floor.

Vincey knew he was in deadly peril, but his brains were working on ice. He felt suddenly tremendous confidence in himself. In three minutes or less, the whole place would be about his ears. Arndt, Rakoff, and Sergei were between him and the jetty, to say nothing of Yussuf, who might have recovered his wits by now; there was another man somewhere in the garden, probably on the orchard side, from which he had approached the villa the night before; a twelve-foot wall bounded the side to the east; and the house lay in front of him.

The garden did not offer one chance in a hundred, for

they would go through it with a finetooth-comb, but the house was an unknown quantity. It was putting his head in the lion's mouth to enter it, but still it was better than certain capture, and there was always the chance of being able to settle accounts with Jakobsen before he was taken.

If only he could get clear away with the paper in his pocket!

The full sense of his mission penetrated him now. The first horror at the murder of Alexis and, as he thought, of Fennix had passed, and he had only the larger vision of his cause. If only he could give the Grand-Duke the list in his jacket pocket, he would have struck a blow to make the foundations of the Kremlin rock.

The house loomed white and irregular in front of him.

Vincey took the flight of steps, leading from the garden to the terrace, three at a time, and found himself opposite the door opening into the big hall, which divided the two main wings of the house. The door was shut, but through a chink between the curtains, screening one of the windows at the side, he could see that it was lit up. That was all. Behind him, back in the darkness, he could hear Rakoff and Arndt running along the path, shouting. A whistle blew three shrill notes. Unless he was to be caught there on the terrace, no time was to be lost. Taking his courage in both hands, he tried the door. It was unlocked. He pushed it open and boldly entered the hall. It was empty. Opposite him, sixty feet or so away, was the front door, a short drive, the road, safety!

He quickly closed the door behind him, thanking Providence for the efficient way in which the hinges were oiled. Five seconds—only five seconds—and he would be in the drive. The capricious deities, who arrange these things, decided, however, that he had already had his share of the luck that was going and denied him those

five seconds; for, at that moment, Jakobsen opened the door of one of the rooms opening off the hall—it was the square book-lined room we have already seen, in which he, Arndt, and Lady Harriet had discussed the means they should employ to make their prisoner speak that very afternoon.

Vincey was saved by the fact that when Jakobsen opened the door, his head was turned the other way. He was speaking over his shoulder to someone in the room—Wanda! Vincey had just time to slip behind the long window curtain, which was of heavy green and gold brocade, reaching down to the ground. For the moment he was safe.

“You had better go to bed,” he heard Jakobsen say in his pleasant chirpy voice. “I think something must have happened from the noise that is going on.”

An indistinct murmur came from the library.

“I will see to it, whatever it is. You run along to bed. Come, Wanda.”

Vincey peered through the opening of the curtains. Wanda, tall, impassive, distant-seeming and aloof as any spirit, came out of the library and started to cross the hall. She had not gone three paces when she paused, gave a little shiver and glanced in the curtain behind which Vincey stood. Quick as a flash, he closed his spy-hole. Jakobsen’s eyes followed hers, a second too late.

“What is the matter? Do you feel a draught?” he asked.

“No, it is nothing. I thought for a moment I had left my bag, but I was holding it all the time. How silly!” She gave a little nervous laugh. “Do get rid of whoever it is and come to bed. I know you are tired. Good night, Louis.”

As soon as she had gone up the stairs, Jakobsen threw open the terrace door. He met Arndt and Dr. Rakoff

panting on the threshold. A swift colloquy in the doorway ensued; then they entered the hall.

"Yussuf has gone to rouse the others." It was Arndt's voice.

"What? No. He was not really hurt. Never saw the man at all. It came like a bolt from the blue, he said. But I can tell you one thing; our gentleman is no slouch at gagging. I could not have done it better myself." Vincey smiled grimly. "We've got him, sure; he will never escape from the garden. Then we will have some fun."

"You say it is impossible for him to have got away by the jetty?" Jakobsen asked anxiously.

"Quite; unless he can kill Sergei, and if he can do that, he can do anything. Sergei is the toughest fighting man I know. He is skulking in the garden somewhere. It is a pity Hetty is not here. She might give him a dose of what she gave Alexis!"

Arndt laughed, and for a moment Vincey's blood ran cold. Lady Harriet's score was mounting. He only hoped he would be there when the day of reckoning came. "Alexis, Fennix, and this chap, whoever he is. Pretty good bag for one day."

Vincey risked a peep between the curtains. Jakobsen, who had changed his evening-coat for a black smoking-jacket, with dark red facings, was leaning against a heavy oak table with carved legs in the middle of the hall, Dr. Rakoff sat dejectedly in a low chair with his head in his hands—he seemed prostrated by his loss—and Arndt, the scornful optimist, the cynical buccaneer, the jovial ex-tyrant, was mixing himself a stiff drink from a tray on the table.

"Fennix is at present sleeping the sleep of the just in the Villa Cheverney," Jakobsen remarked calmly.

"What!" Arndt all but dropped his glass.

"Fennix has lived to die another day," said Jakobsen. "I will tell you about it later. Hullo! Sergei! What are you doing here?"

A voice Vincey had heard before spoke from the doorway.

"Gustaf has taken my place, sir. He is a good man and can be trusted to let no one pass him. But the stranger is not down there by the sea. I have eyes like a hawk, and have searched. Two men are on the orchard side, the remaining three are covering the rest of the grounds. He cannot escape, if he is in the garden, but I do not think he is there."

"Escaped?" Jakobsen said sharply.

"No. He could not escape. There are wire and *pieges à loup* on the orchard side, besides Michael has been there the whole evening; and there is wire on the top of the four-metre wall on the other side; and I have been guarding the way to the sea."

"Then where is he?"

"In the house."

"What makes you think that?" Jakobsen asked with composure.

"Because there are only three hiding-places in the garden and I searched them all as I came up; and as he was in none of those three, he would have been found by now," Sergei answered imperturbably, crossing over to Arndt, who had beckoned to him, being apparently struck with an idea.

"Could he have got into the house?" Arndt asked quickly.

"Easily," Jakobsen answered. "Since we got back half an hour ago, Wanda and I have been in the library. He could easily have come in by the door, which was left open for you."

"He may be in this very room," Dr. Rakoff exclaimed

shrilly. Vincey noted that the doctor's surmises had an unpleasant habit of being very near the mark.

Soon he would have to fight for his life. He saw no hope of escape, but if he were to die during the next few minutes, and that seemed a foregone conclusion, he made up his mind to take as many as possible with him.

Very stealthily, after seeing that his full-length black mask was properly adjusted, he drew his hunting-knife. He held it in his right hand, his pistol in his left, for he shot equally well with either hand—an accomplishment which he owed to his father, who had trained him that way when he was a boy.

"There is only one hiding-place in this room," said Jakobsen calmly, almost indifferently, "and that is behind the curtains."

The moment had come.

Vincey pulled the curtains apart and stepped into the room. Strangely enough he had never felt so careless and unconcerned in his life. One glance gave him the position of the people in the hall. To the left of him sat Dr. Rakoff. His hands gripped the arms of his chair so that his knuckles showed white, and his jaw dropped as he gazed at the fearful apparition Jakobsen's words had called to life. Against the table in the middle of the room, but still a little to Vincey's left, lounged Jakobsen. His face was as inscrutable as ever; cool he was, like ice, and his right hand fingered something in his jacket pocket. Arndt was on the further side, the front door side, the safety side of the table, Sergei a little behind him, half a pace to the right.

A grin spread over Arndt's face, ogre-like, greedy, the grin of a cruel child before it pulls the legs off the fly, a grin that drove Vincey wild. . . . At the top of the stairs he apprehended rather than actually saw a tall figure, black and white, a woman, looking down on the scene.

All this he took in in a flash, especially Arndt's grin—he had never hated anything in his life as much as he hated Arndt's grin.

He flung up his pistol and let fly. He would teach Arndt to grin like that. He missed him by a hair's breadth and shot Sergei plumb through the head.

As Vincey fired, two things happened simultaneously.

Jakobsen spoilt the latest thing in smoking suits by shooting from his pocket ineffectually—and the light went out.

The architect, or whoever it is who sees to these things, a discerning fellow anyway, well versed in modern psychology, had placed a switch at the top of the stairs, by which it was possible for late bedcomers to extinguish all the lights in the hall with one flick of the finger. Vincey only learnt this afterwards. At the time he accepted the absolute darkness as a God-sent miracle, and made the most of it. Arndt would not dare to shoot for fear of hitting Jakobsen, nor Jakobsen for fear of hitting Arndt, Dr. Rakoff he counted out—ten to one he was grovelling behind his chair—and Sergei was finished; for as the light went out he had heard his body crash across the table.

The five seconds which they would take in finding the switch were his opportunity. He had wanted five seconds and he had got them. He had the disposition of the furniture firmly in his head, and he knew that if he kept to the right of the table he had a clear run to the front door. He put his head down and charged for the door at top speed. Unfortunately, however, there are other obstructions than furniture and in the dark he ran full tilt into one of them, Arndt. Vincey's head was down, as we have said: Arndt was making for the electric light switch by the library door; and Arndt was very tall, six feet and three inches to be exact. Vincey's head caught Arndt full in the stomach and knocked every ounce of breath out of

him. He collapsed, speechless, tripped over Sergei's leg, which was protruding from behind the table, and fell heavily, with Vincey on top of him. Luckily, Vincey's head was a hard one, and it had caught Arndt on the exact spot that boxers try for, the solar plexus. A blow there is a thousand times more efficacious than any battering of the head or jaw. It temporarily paralyses the mental and physical capacities of the recipient and hurts more than anything on earth.

If Arndt had been able to hold Vincey for ten seconds, this story would have had a different ending. But he could not. He could only wave his arms feebly and pray for a swift death, which he guessed to be exceedingly imminent, for, in falling, he had received a jab in the arm from Vincey's hunting-knife. But Vincey had no leisure for private vendettas. His one preoccupation was to get clear away with Dr. Rakoff's paper.

He extricated himself from Arndt's embrace and scrambled to his feet at the very moment when Jakobsen found a second switch by the terrace door. He was half-way across the hall, eight or nine paces from the front door leading into the drive. It flashed through his mind that if Jakobsen were anything of a shot, he could not fail to hit him. And Jakobsen was not a bad shot. Moreover he was as cool as could be, and took his time in aiming. Luckily for Vincey his pistol was of small calibre, good enough for ten paces, but uncertain at nearly twenty, which was the length of the hall. Thrice he fired. The first shot sang past Vincey's ear, and splintered a graceful faïence jar on a stand by the window; the second chipped his right wrist; and the third embedded itself in the panel an inch above his head as he flung the door open.

But though Vincey had escaped from the house, his troubles were by no means over.

The firing had summoned the searchers from the gar-

den. As he dashed down the drive, he glimpsed three figures approaching swiftly from the lawn. One of them stopped to fire, and gravel spurted up between his legs. Behind him Jakobsen was shouting. As he sped on, it came to him that Jakobsen was telling them not to shoot but to cut him off.

The villa stood in its own large grounds and the only house in its immediate neighbourhood was unoccupied, but all the same a young battle would lead to unpleasant investigations if any gendarmes happened to be making their round. It was now a race between Vincey and the two nearest of the bodyguard. He was twenty yards from the gate and they, unable to cut him off, had struck the drive ten paces behind him. That cursed gate was shut! If it was locked or bolted he was done for, finished! Anyhow, it was five chances to one that he would not get it open before they were up to him; and he only dared shoot in the last extremity. He had no more desire to encounter the police than Jakobsen had. Vincey put on a sprint and gained a yard. Five paces more! Two! God Almighty! Where was the catch? A knife grazed his forearm, and stuck quivering in the wooden gate. Stinking breath was hot upon his neck as he wrenched it open and struck blindly behind him. His knife went up to its hilt in something soft. He left it there.

And then Vincey had a bit of luck, the sort of luck that does not come twice in a lifetime. Outside the gate, a five-seater touring-car was purring very slowly up the hill. Its single occupant, a cheerful-looking youngish man, wearing a light dust-coat over his evening dress, was looking curiously towards the villa, obviously attracted by the various sounds, from revolver shots to curses, which had issued during the last minute or so (for all these junketings following one on top of another occupied a fiftieth

part of the time it has taken me to describe them) from behind the high walls.

When Vincey, masked, sweating, streaked with blood, grasping a great forty-five Colt automatic, hotly followed by a big bearded bandit brandishing a knife with an eighteen inch blade, swung through the gate, caught sight of the car, made for it and leapt on the footboard, threatening to blow his pursuer's brains into the Mediterranean if he advanced another step, the driver showed no surprise, but remarked amiably as he changed speed and accelerated:

"Say, friend, I guess that was a close call. Bin having a rough house in there by the look of you."

They swept round the corner out of sight of Vincey's antagonist, who had been joined by two more of the bodyguard. They were gesticulating furiously, obviously uncertain what to do.

"Well, I am not armed," the gentleman continued quietly, with a broad Western accent, "so I guess the next move is up to you. Do you want me to drop you somewhere, or would you like the car?"

Vincey could hardly speak. Free! Free! He was out of that hell of a garden, that hell of a house. He was no longer hunted, no longer one against many. The strain of the last hours had told on him badly and he thought for a second that he was going to collapse as he climbed into the seat by the driver, who observed: "Perhaps you don't speak English. I am sorry I cannot oblige in another tongue, but my French does not go any further than shaking my head when the guy at the frontier asks me if I have anything to declare."

Vincey handed the other his pistol and said in English: "Please take this. It is my only weapon. But do not think me outrageously discourteous if I do not remove my mask. It is unusual to wear one in this day and gen-

eration, I know, but unusual things have been happening to-night. If you will drop me further on I shall be infinitely obliged. I cannot apologize enough for boarding your car so unceremoniously but, as you saw, I had really no alternative."

The gentleman laughed. "Holy Mike! What an evening! There I was in Monte Carlo, losing money and boring myself stiff at supper with a lot of guys from li'l old New York, and now I've stepped straight into a dime novel. Keep your gun, sir. I guess you're all right. But gee-whiz! You want some cleaning up. You are bleeding like a stuck pig!"

Half a mile further on, he pulled the car up under a lamp. The broad road flanked by majestic villas was absolutely deserted. The whole world seemed asleep.

"Let us see what the damage is before we go any further," the American continued calmly. "Only a scratch? A pretty nasty scratch from the way it is bleeding. You are lucky in tumbling right in on the right man. I am a physician from San Francisco, and I am on a holiday here at the Cap Martin hotel. I bought this car in Nice a fortnight ago, and I am mighty pleased with it." While he monologued, he helped Vincey off with his coat and examined his right arm. "You're right; it is not very serious. The slash on the arm is nothing, though it looks ugly. You will have to be careful of the wrist though. Bullet, wasn't it?" Vincey nodded. "Well, I am not asking any questions, but it has chipped the bone, I should say. Do you think it is safe for me to bind it up, or do you think your friends will be coming along behind in the hopes of having the last word? I have got first-aid things here—never know when you may not want them."

On Vincey's affirmative, he produced bandages and a small flask of brandy from a pocket in the car.

"Take a drink of this. I'll look the other way while

you take off that Dick Turpin affair. I don't deny I am mighty curious, but I guess you have got a right to be sensitive about your features!"

Vincey took a good pull at the flask and felt wonderfully revived. When the American had bound up his wrist and forearm, Vincey thanked him and said that they had better part. He knew that he was safe as far as Jakobsen was concerned, for pursuit outside the grounds of the villa was much too dangerous to be a practical consideration. And he wanted to get back to Monaco as quickly and quietly as possible.

"Not on your life!" the doctor replied unexpectedly. "You have been living too much in the atmosphere of a bandit story. That is your trouble. If you walked about the countryside, covered with blood as you are, more than half of which, if you do not mind my saying so, is not your own, you would be jailed before you had gone half a mile, even though it is two o'clock in the morning. No, sir. When I take on a job, I do it thoroughly. I will drop you one hundred yards from your front door wherever that may be, and I give you my word I will not look in your direction once you are out of the car. I guess you have had enough trouble for one evening and you do not want to spoil the effect of that Pathé Frères escape by being taken in charge by the French police. That would be an anti-climax."

Vincey laughed. This was a priceless fellow. He was quite right too. His bloodstained dishevelled appearance would justify any policeman arresting him on suspicion.

Half an hour later, after having been dropped at a discreet distance from the house in Monaco, he was changing back into his evening clothes while the Grand Duke Peter, seated at the table, gazed rapturously at Rakoff's list. But in spite of their victory, they were both of them sad and sick at heart. A lovable boy was Alexis.

CHAPTER IX

IN WHICH THE DUCHESS AND GEORGE FENNIX HAVE AN INTIMATE CONVERSATION, AND JAKOBSEN PAYS A VISIT TO THE VILLA CHEVERNEY

AT ten o'clock that morning, Avril and Hilda Belamy were attending to household matters in Avril's pretty sitting-room overlooking the garden. It was a continuation of the morning room in which they had gathered overnight on their return from Lady Harriet's party. Not that a word had been said of the gathering. There was a tactful conspiracy of silence. Hilda was cheerful but severely practical. It was her early morning way. Avril looked tired and had slight rings under her eyes as though she had not slept; becoming they were, faintly blue; they gave interest to her face. She talked little and seemed preoccupied.

The menus had been arranged, the character of a new housemaid discussed, and Hilda put down her pen.

"That is all then for the moment," she said, moving to the window. "We cannot give the garage orders until we know what people want to do. Everyone is very late this morning."

Avril said nothing. Her thoughts seemed far away.

"By the way," Hilda exclaimed suddenly, "how did Harry get back last night? Do you realize we forget all about him?"

"He came back with Courtney," Mme. de Cheverney replied quietly. "They got back about a quarter to one. I was reading in bed and heard them."

"Oh, I see. They crammed three into the Bugatti."

"No," Avril replied. "Mr. Vincey was not there. He must have come back on his own somehow."

Suddenly she felt herself blushing furiously, and prayed heaven Hilda would not notice the slip she had made. If she had been reading, as she said, instead of watching for Vincey's return, as she had really done, from an unoccupied bedroom on the other side of the house (there are times in life when one glimpse means so much), though she might have heard the car, she could not possibly know who were in it, except by deduction; and deduction would not have given her the result she passed on to Hilda.

But Hilda had noticed nothing.

"Have you arranged about the tennis for this afternoon?" Avril enquired hurriedly.

"Yes, Guy Rattray is coming over to lunch and is bringing Sheila Duggan and a Mr. Palairet. They motored out from England together it seems—Guy and Mr. Palairet, I mean. I asked Mrs. Duggan, but she was engaged."

"You've got the right number, then?" Avril said with an unwonted interest. Desperately anxious she was to lead Hilda's thoughts as far as possible from the doings of the night before.

"Yes," and Hilda recapitulated: "Guy, Mr. Palairet, Courtney and Mr. Vincey for a men's four."

"Mr. Vincey won't be able to play. He has hurt his wrist." A high boy's voice spoke from the curtained doorway which led into the morning-room. Both the women looked round. A sturdy little chap of about ten was regarding them solemnly, his legs apart and his hands in his pockets. It was Jérôme, duc de Cheverney, prince de Commercy, comte de Menars, baron d'Yspare, to give him four of the eleven titles with which he was credited in Part III of the *Almanach de Gotha*.

"Oh, bother!" Miss Bellamy was exasperated. Her lawn tennis party seemed to be pursued by ill-luck. "What is the matter with his wrist, Jérôme?"

"He has strained it," the boy replied. "He has a bandage round it and a leather strap thing on top of the bandage."

"How did he do that? His wrist was all right yesterday."

"He did it cranking up an auto."

"Do not say an auto, Jérôme. A motor-car," Avril murmured from the sofa.

"A motor-car," Jérôme repeated very loudly and solemnly with a twinkle in his eye.

Madame de Cheverney smiled.

"Mr. Vincey is rather cross this morning," the child continued explanatorily, "not very, just a little. The motor-car broke down and he had to walk most of the way back from Menton with a bad wrist."

"Menton!" exclaimed Avril.

"His friend has shot lions in Africa, but he is going to Rome to-day."

"What friend, Jérôme?" Avril asked, puzzled.

"Mr. Vincey's friend in Menton, of course," the boy answered.

Avril began to understand and her heart lightened. It was as though something that had been stifling her had suddenly been removed. Vincey had met some friend last night and had gone with him to Menton, where he was probably staying; the car had broken down and he had had to walk seven or eight miles home—that accounted for his coming back so late last night. . . . If only she had known that, what miserable hours she would have been spared!

She had lain awake imagining, imagining . . . women, dark smooth southern women with very white teeth and

very long lashes . . . there are thousands of them on the *côte d'azur*, ripe fruit; or some chance encounter at Lady Harriet's and a rendezvous in some hotel—such a thing was quite possible in that house of quick intimacies. . . . And all the time it was nothing. He had been talking over old times with a friend, and had hurt his wrist cranking up the car—poor wrist—and the car had broken down and he had had to walk, poor boy. She was so happy! Jérôme had perched himself by her on the arm of the sofa. She drew him to her, and kissed him suddenly, feverishly, almost roughly.

"Steady on, Mummy, mind my collar," Jérôme said with dignity.

She laughed. There were tears in her eyes. Then she noticed that Hilda was watching her with evident surprise.

"No wonder poor Mr. Vincey was inclined to be cross after having walked all those miles home in his thin evening shoes," she said quickly. "I hope you did your lessons well this morning, Jérôme. What was it? German?"

"No; geography; South America, where George has been."

"Uncle George: not George, Jérôme."

"Where great-uncle George has been. He is my great-uncle," Jérôme added quickly.

"Oh, you're incorrigible! What is Mr. Vincey doing now?"

"Reading, I expect. But he won't be vacant until twelve. . . .

"Vacant? Oh, I see! You mean free."

"We do German from half-past ten till a quarter past eleven, and then algebra from a quarter past eleven until twelve. This is the break."

"Well then, you had better run along. It is two minutes to the half-hour now."

"Did Mr. Vincey tell you to say that he would not be able to play, Jérôme?" asked Hilda from the window.

"No, but I know he won't be able to play because he cannot write."

When the boy had gone, Hilda turned to Avril. "Is it not annoying? First of all Mr. Fennix won't play, and now Mr. Vincey cannot. What shall I do? I really cannot ring up Guy Rattray and ask him to bring another man. . . ."

"Wait a minute," Avril said thoughtfully. "I think I can help you. I had a letter this morning from a young American doctor, who is staying at the Cap Martin Hotel. Dr. Parker, his name is: Alexander Something-or-other Parker. He is a distant connection of the Winspears and he has letters of introduction from Camille Warwick. I was going to write and ask him to dine; so why not telephone and ask him to lunch to-day? He is sure to play tennis; and if he has not got a racket, Courtney can lend him one."

"Courtney can lend whom what?"

George Fennix, dandified and smiling, stood in the doorway. "Good morning, Avril. Good morning, Miss Bellamy."

"Good morning, Mr. Fennix," Hilda replied coldly. "Shall I telephone, Avril?"

"Make George do it. On the stage and in novels, diplomats never seem to do anything else. Let us see how they do it in real life."

"In real life they leave it to the chancellery servant," said George, laughing. "However, anything to oblige."

Avril explained matters and George went to the telephone on the writing-table. After the usual interchange

of compliments with central, he got to grips with the situation.

"Dr. Parker. Yes. Dr. Par—— Oh, that is Dr. Parker speaking! Good morning. No, you do not know me. I am nobody. I am speaking on behalf of Mme. de Cheverney. No, not Major Sherman. Mme. de Cheverney. No. C for cabaret—H for hardware—E for everlasting. Yes, the Duchesse! Precisely. Yes, very well, thanks. Blooming. Bloo—— Yes, that's right. I am nobody; just her uncle. Fennix. No, not Phoenix; Fennix. F for falsehood—E for elevate—N for mighty—— Yes, you've got it. No, that's my brother. Yes, nice fellow, isn't he? My niece wants you to come to lunch to-day—You will? Splendid. You have your own car? Excellent. Delighted. Not at all. Charmed. Good-bye, good-bye. I assure you the pleasure is ours. Great fun! Good-bye."

George put up the receiver and sank into a chair, moping his brow. "And to think that there are people who use the telephone out of pure lightheartedness," he exclaimed. "But what a nice fellow! Really, you are lucky in your relations, Avril. . . . He said he was highly honoured—and that he had not really dared to hope that he would get an opportunity of knowing you—and that he just longed to make my acquaintance—and that he considered it real cordial on your part to ring him up just as though you were Mrs. Jones, of Jonesville, instead of sending a state carriage and four bays. . . ."

"Don't be an idiot, George!" Avril laughed. "Hullo! Here's Courtney."

Winspear, in white flannels and a brightly coloured Fair Isle sweater, lounged into the room.

"'Morning everybody. Anyone seen Vincey this morning? I want him to fence. I suppose he got home last night somehow. I waited about nearly half an hour for

him but he had mysteriously disappeared. The woman was looking for him too."

"What woman?" said George. "Do be intelligible."

"He always calls Lady Harriet 'the woman,'" explained Avril.

"Well," remarked Miss Bellamy shortly, "you will have to find someone else to fence with; firstly, because Mr. Vincey always gives Jérôme his lessons in the morning, as you ought to know by now, and secondly, because he has hurt his wrist."

"Oh, damn!"

Avril realized that Courtney had got out of the wrong side of his bed that morning and wanted "gentling."

"I tell you what, old boy," she said tactfully, "if you have got nothing to do and would like to please your only sister, perhaps you would run over to the Cap Martin Hotel, find a nice young American cousin of ours, who is a great friend of Camille Warwick's, whom you like (his name is Parker by the way, Dr. Parker of San Francisco. No, George; not Mr. Potter of Texas! I knew you would think of something moth-eaten like that), give him one of those excellent cocktails that you told me about the other day, and bring him back to lunch."

After Winspear had gone over a certain amount of ground with which we are already familiar, he took to the idea and allowed Avril to order the car for him.

"Are you coming, George?" he asked, when he heard that his Hispano-Suiza "torpedo" was at the door.

"George is going to keep me company," remarked Avril, with a smile in her uncle's direction. "We are going to stroll in the sun, and tear our friends' characters to pieces like two old . . ."

"Diplomats," interpolated Hilda.

Winspear laughed. "You are having a rough passage to-day, George. May I ask Vincey to come, Avril? It

won't do Jérôme any harm to miss some of his lessons for once."

"No, you may not. What do you think Jérôme has a tutor for? Are not you capable of finding Dr. Parker by yourself? He is quite tame, and will not eat you."

"All right, all right!"

"What are you going to do, Hilda?" Avril asked when Winspear had left them.

"I promised to give Harry a lesson at lawn tennis," she answered slowly, "but perhaps I ought to see if Mr. Vincey wants his wrist bound up. You know what men are. He probably did it himself all anyhow."

"Well, he can manage to wait till twelve o'clock," Avril said almost impatiently. "You can ask him then."

"Has it ever struck you, Avril," said George thoughtfully, when they were alone together, "that no one can start any subject of conversation without it coming round to Vincey?" He lit a cigarette. "I will wager that directly or indirectly you have been talking about Vincey all the morning."

"Yes, we have," Avril replied slowly.

"Curious, is it not?" said George.

"What do you put it down to?" Avril asked as they made their way through the long open French-windows into the garden.

George hesitated. "He has got a very strong personality, of course," he said, "but I do not think it is entirely that. He is rather a man of mystery, is he not?"

"In what way?"

"Well, he is hardly the sort of man one would expect to find taking the job of tutor to a boy of ten, for example, is he? Of course, in these difficult times people do all sorts of things, I know; but one would think that with his abilities and breeding, he would have found something that would have contained greater possibilities for the future."

"I had not thought about it, but I suppose you are right," she replied.

Slowly and in silence they strolled to the lowest of the three flower-clad terraces overlooking the sea. A small sailing boat was scudding gaily along before the wind a couple of hundred yards off shore, and in the distance an aeroplane hummed its way towards Nice. Everything was very bright. The rocks below them gleamed in the sunlight as though they had been polished. The sea was intensely blue, and the palm trees bordering the walk were stately and imposing, like sentries in full dress. The air was warm like a kiss.

"Do you like Vincey very much, Avril?" Fennix said suddenly. They had stopped and were gazing out to sea.

Avril put up her sunshade. The morning sun can be very hot even in the winter on the Riviera; and there are times when a sunshade comes in useful.

She did not answer, but gazed steadily at the white-sailed boat, so gay, so alive.

"I beg your pardon, Avril. I did not mean to be impertinent," George said a little stiffly.

Without looking towards him, she put out her hand and touched his.

"I did not answer because I was thinking," she said. "I rather think I like him more than anyone on earth."

"But you are not certain?"

"No, I am not certain. It is so difficult to know if it is the real thing, is it not? Oh! I am attracted by him tremendously. He is the sort of man who gives a woman thrills! But I am no longer a girl, George—thirty-one last month, if you want to know—and though one can still have as exquisite thrills as one could at twenty, one does not immediately fall into the error of thinking that they are going to last for ever." She stopped and bent forward, resting her chin in the palm of her hand, her

elbow on the wall. "I do not know. I have thought and thought—tried to treat it dispassionately. You see, it is not as though I were just anyone. There is all this," she made a vague gesture, "and Jérôme. If it were not for that, I should just let myself go . . . and see. I have never had love . . . real love, and I want it. Great riches are a curse at times. One becomes suspicious . . . there have been plots. . . ."

"I cannot take favourites like Mme. de Bussy or Princess Morigiani or Camille Warwick. I am not made that way—any more than I can take passing fancies like our little friend Colette. I wish I could. It would simplify matters. As you say, what does one know of Julian Vincey, the man of mystery, as you call him? But I think it would kill me if I found he was here for my money. What does that mean, George?"

"Has he ever given any sign?" Fennix said, with unusual hesitation.

"Not the slightest. He is always charming to me, but . . . nothing more."

She turned away from the sea and they continued their stroll.

"By the way," Avril said suddenly, "I have had to change the date of my ball from February the ninth to February the eleventh, Tuesday to Thursday. Is not it a nuisance? It appears it clashes with the Macedonian Charity Ball, and as that is going to be graced by most of the royalties down here, I have had to give way."

"What a bore! Is it very inconvenient?"

"Not really. A good deal of writing and telephoning; that is all. Hullo! Is not that Harry over there? He looks very wide awake for once. I wonder what he wants. I suppose it is us that he is waving to. I hope it is nothing important. I do not feel like coping with things to-day."

"Bad night?" suggested George, throwing away his cigarette.

"Not very grand. By the way, are you and Colette going to lunch in Nice?"

George grinned. "If you do not mind, Avril."

"I don't mind. I think it is very nice for you both. Mind you are very kind to her, George. Poor Colette feels out of it sometimes, I know. Courtney does not like her, and Hilda's nose is so very straight when she looks down it. I will order a car for you at half-past twelve, if that will do?"

"Well, young man, what is it?" George asked in the rather damping elderly way he affected when Harry was inclined to become self-important; an inclination which revealed itself whenever anything brought him, even remotely, within Mme. de Cheverney's orbit.

"Mr. Jakobsen and his sister have arrived, Duchesse. I think Mr. Jakobsen wants to speak to you alone."

Avril made a grimace, and looked at George.

"Oh, lor', it is about . . . you know what, George. Don't you think you could come and support me?"

Rather to her surprise, Fennix did not answer at once. He appeared to be thinking deeply.

"On the whole, no. Better not at this juncture. But mind you, tell me afterwards exactly how the conversation runs. Do not forget anything; it is rather important."

Avril looked slightly astonished at the weight of George's words, but only replied: "All right."

George glanced casually at Harry. Mme. de Cheverney took the hint.

"Harry, run on and tell them I am coming, will you?"

"Look here, Avril," said George quickly, when the youth had sighed and left them—for some reason which no one had ever fathomed, Harry always sighed when he

left Avril—it was a sort of exaggerated courtesy—“never mind why I am suspicious of Jakobsen and the S.I.B.V., but if you take my advice, and Vincey will give you the same advice if you ask him, you will avoid it like poison, like poison! Put Jakobsen off. Make any excuse you can think of, but do not be mixed up in it. We have not by any means heard the last of the S.I.B.V., and when that day comes, if it ever does, those who have anything to do with it will heave a profound sigh of relief, unless I am very much mistaken. I am not a mystificator—life is quite complicated enough as it is—and if I knew anything definite I should tell you. I can only say this: something very funny is going on. That I do know. If you think I have a bee in my bonnet about it, consult Vincey.”

Avril nodded. She was not by any means given to taking advice, but she was distinctly impressed by George's words.

“And whatever you do,” Fennix added unexpectedly, “do not trust Lady Harriet.”

Mme. de Cheverney stopped short in the middle of the path.

“Hetty!” she exclaimed. “What on earth has she got to do with it? George, you are not playing fair. There is some mystery and you know it. . . .”

“There is some mystery and I do *not* know it. I only wish I did,” he said impatiently. “I only know that there are letters which go astray and whisky that tastes like sherry, and dead men who drink vermouth-cassis outside the Café de la Paix in Paris, and a tall, barred house in a side street of Monaco, which is only visited by night. But that is quite enough to go on with.”

Avril's eyes opened wider and wider.

“It is all right. I have not got a touch of the sun. Who introduced Jakobsen to you?”

“Hetty,” murmured Mme. de Cheverney thoughtfully.

"I guessed as much," said George, cocking his hat. "Now run away like a good niece, and tell Jakobsen that though nothing is nearer your heart than the S.I.B.V., you are out of pocket-money and cannot do anything for him. I will follow in a couple of minutes and make my bow to the Baroness. And, Avril, if you are in any doubt, ask Vincey, ask Vincey."

Quite an interesting morning, George thought, as he watched Avril out of sight. He knew Avril's secret—poor Avril, a heart of gold hers—he strongly suspected that Julian Vincey was the son of that *seigneur de la vieille roche*, Prince Ternine—and Mme. Colette would presumably explain last night's mystery of the sherry and soda. Now for the baroness. There lay the crux, or so he thought, of the whole affair. If he could only find out her relation to Vincey—and it looked a pretty close one last night—he would be getting along.

Miss Bellamy, the Baroness, and Harry Raphael were sitting in the sun outside the summer-house that was shaped like a Grecian temple. Their talk was languishing. At no time had the two women very much to say to one another, and Harry's conversation was of so supreme a triteness that it seemed to reduce his companions to speechlessness.

At first George made heavy weather. The Baroness was *distracte* and looked very tired (lines under the eyes were prevalent that morning, it seemed); Miss Bellamy had not forgotten that they were barely on speaking terms, and Harry had not forgiven him for what he termed his "patronizing manner" of ten minutes before. The ladies talked dresses. George criticized one worn by a mutual acquaintance the night before and was snubbed neatly and effectively by Hilda. He put his arm through Harry's and drew him tactfully apart.

"We are not wanted," he said confidentially. "If we

went to the house, do you think it would be possible to get a lemon squash? I seem to have been talking ever since I got up this morning and it has made me thirsty."

As he spoke, he noticed that the Baroness's eyes were upon him. She looked as though she wanted to say something but could not bring herself to speaking point.

Suddenly her glance changed—a distinct look of fear came into her eyes—and he saw that she was gazing beyond him.

"Mr. Fennix," she said suddenly, hurriedly, "I wonder if you would give this cigarette-case to Mr. Vincey in case I do not see him. He left it at Lady Harriet's last night. I found it on the sofa where we had been sitting talking after he had gone."

"Certainly, with pleasure." George put it in his pocket. Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Avril and Jakobsen strolling slowly towards them from the direction of the house. Jakobsen's head was bent. Unless Hilda or Harry mentioned the cigarette-case, her message was safe. George guessed that she had meant to pass the case to Vincey herself, but had been afraid that Jakobsen might whisk her away before she saw him.

"Come on, Harry," George's relentless arm pulled Harry in the opposite direction from that in which Avril and the secretary of the S.I.B.V. were approaching.

"But I thought you wanted to go to the house to get a lemon squash, Mr. Fennix," Harry bleated.

"So I do, my boy, so I do. Only if we go that way we shall have to pass the time of day in a friendly way with Mr. Jakobsen—and that takes time. We can slip round here and our lemon squash will be five minutes nearer than if we crossed the lawn."

"I do not understand about Mr. Vincey's cigarette-case," remarked Harry as George hurried him along the

trellised walk, "because he asked me for a cigarette last night and said that he had left his case at home."

"Of course; that was after he had lost it," replied George, thinking he had done wisely in keeping Harry with him. "He found his case was not there, forgot he had taken it out before, and thought he had left it at home."

"No," returned Harry with gentle obstinacy, "because it was at the beginning of the evening, before . . ." He stopped and became rather red in the face.

"Before what?" George asked with a friendly pressure of his arm. He remembered now that Harry had been hanging about the hall when he and Colette had nearly blundered into the little room.

"Before we arrived. It was in the car going," said Harry.

"And therefore before he talked to Baroness Lewel in the music-room," said George softly.

"Not the music-room, the little smoking-room," Harry corrected him innocently.

How much do you know? George wondered to himself.

"I say, Harry," said George with tact, "you are a man of the world and all that; has it struck you that there is anything up in that quarter? Vincey and the Baroness?"

Harry preened himself.

"Well, they were in there rather a long time, weren't they?" he said. "Three-quarters of an hour."

"How do you know that?" George asked, a trifle too quickly.

Now who the devil put this half-baked boy on to watch them, he wondered?

"Well, I saw them go in there and I saw them come out three-quarters of an hour later," Harry said sulkily.

"Hm, Vincey must have found that his case was on him

all the time. Still, if I were you, I should not mention it to anyone"—a silly sly look had crept into Harry's eyes—"not even Colette."

"Why Colette?" Harry stammered, and George knew that he had hit the bull's eye with a sighting shot.

"You are great friends, aren't you?" Fennix said casually. "I always imagined you told her everything. Here we are! Now for our lemon squash. You see to it, Harry, while I return Vincey his property."

He took the case—an oblong, silver, engine-turned case—from his pocket and glanced at it.

"J.V. (Julian Vincey) large as life. You see I was right. He had it on him all the time." But he did not show it to Harry.

As soon as he was in the passage and out of sight, he opened it. There were cigarettes, six of them, and . . . yes, under the cigarettes a folded paper, very thin, covered with a small fine writing, Russian characters. . . .

We will not discuss the niceties of George's behaviour. However, for those who enjoy chewing ethical cud, we will mention two facts (*a*) that he explored the case without a single qualm of conscience, (*b*) that it never even occurred to him to try to read (and he could have probably made out bits of it with his remnant of Russian) what was written on the paper. Illogical. . . .

A moment later, he knocked at the door of the school-room, which opened off the nursery. Jérôme was bent over the table, doing a simple multiplication in algebra. Vincey, a lean, nervous figure in a double-breasted grey flannel suit, was standing with his back to the mantelpiece. A broad leather strap under which a fringe of white bandage could be seen, encircled his right wrist.

"Hullo, Uncle George!" the boy cried, pushing his chair back, as soon as he saw him.

"Sit down and go on with your work," his tutor said

sharply. Jérôme obeyed promptly, with a comical glance in George's direction.

"Sorry to interrupt you," Fennix murmured, beckoning to Vincey who followed him to the doorway. "Jakobsen and Baroness Lewel are here," he said very low, as though unwilling to disturb Jérôme's calculations. "As the Baroness feared she might not see you, she gave me this cigarette-case which you left behind at Lady Harriet's last night."

Vincey gave George a swift glance as he thanked him and put it in his pocket.

"I do not know if they will stay to lunch, but Avril is sure to ask them, I should think. Between you and me I think he has come on S.I.B.V. business. Avril's letter must have been a rude shock, what? However, I do not think she will go back on it. I had a word with her this morning, and made her promise to consult you if she is in any doubt."

"Me!" Vincey exclaimed in surprise. "Why on earth should she consult me?"

After a glance up and down the passage, George stepped back a pace. The other followed, shutting the door behind him.

"Because she has a high opinion of your sagacity, my dear fellow; so have I, especially where the S.I.B.V. is concerned."

Vincey frowned. He did not much relish George's manner. It was a trifle too mysterious.

"Mind you," George continued smoothly, "as far as I am concerned, Avril can give her money to whom she likes. I have no axe to grind—any more than you have"—he hastened to add, "but one cannot help feeling that there are a good many undercurrents in this business. You yourself said, if you remember, that you thought it a pity she should support the S.I.B.V., and it was due to

your corroboration of my arguments that she decided to keep her money in her pocket instead of giving it to Jakobsen. Now, my interest in the whole thing is a mischievous one—I confess it frankly. I suspect the S.I.B.V., lock, stock and barrel, and it amuses me to put a spoke in Jakobsen's wheel. What your interest is I do not pretend to know, but it seems to me that it is substantially the same as mine." George paused, but Vincey said nothing. "If that is so, I do not see why we should not help each other now and again, do you?"

Vincey could not help smiling. "You are forcing my hand very neatly, Fennix," he said. "However, I was going to speak to you to-day anyhow. As you have guessed, I have reasons of my own for not wishing success to the S.I.B.V., and I do not mind owning that I was profoundly thankful when you took a hand in dissuading the Duchesse the other day. But, as you say, there are undercurrents and some of them are devilish strong. I cannot go into things now—there is not time—you will just have to believe or disbelieve my bare word. Jakobsen and his crowd are about as safe to monkey with as a bag of rattlesnakes, and you have been monkeying, or are suspected of having monkeyed, with them—it all comes to the same thing—a damn' sight too much for your safety." Vincey paused to let his words sink in. George noticed that he was looking unusually worn and haggard. "If I had known two days ago the position you were in I should have warned you, but I did not. Your life is in deadly peril, Fennix. You have not an idea what you have got mixed up in. If you take my advice you will leave for England to-day and apply immediately to be sent to Peking or Chili, somewhere the other side of the world. That is my advice to you as a friend. I am not a scaremonger and I know what I am talking about."

"Thanks, old chap," said George easily. "I am glad

you told me that. Now we know where we are. Of course, I shan't go. . . ."

"Then you are a fool," said Vincey shortly. "I should in your place."

"No, you wouldn't," Fennix returned quickly with a gay smile. "You would see it out. But I shall accept the warning all the same. I do not doubt its seriousness for a minute. I always suspected that the S.I.B.V. was a cloak and that there was something pretty big working behind it. But danger to an insignificant diplomatist like me! Am I really worth their while?"

"Well, I have warned you," Vincey said with a hint of impatience, "and I have never spoken more seriously in my life."

"Tell me one thing; is Avril in danger?"

"No."

There was a pause and the two men looked at each other steadily.

"You were recognized last night, Prince Ternine," George said very low.

Vincey went white.

"Then the game is up," he said with a sort of groan, and passed his hand wearily across his eyes.

"Not so," said George quickly. "Listen," and he told him how Hilda Bellamy had overheard his name.

"But how did you guess?" Vincey asked when he had finished. "How did the name mean anything to you?"

"I saw your father in Petersburg years ago. You are like him; and, if you will excuse my saying so, you are far from being the usual tutor. You interested me from the first."

Vincey nodded thoughtfully. "Clever of you all the same."

"Look here," said George, after a glance over his

shoulder, "you need not fear that I am going to butt in and spoil your game. I shall be much too occupied from what you tell me in keeping a whole skin. But is there ever going to be an end to this business? Can you tell me that?"

Vincey laughed grimly, unpleasantly, as though consumed with angry memory; very still he was, leaning lightly against the cream-distempered wall.

"You need not worry, I do not think it will be very long now before Jakobsen gets a nasty surprise."

In spite of George's brave face, he felt anything but gay when he returned to the smoking-room, which Harry, tired of waiting, had quitted some minutes before. Was Vincey right? Was it really as serious as all that? Perhaps the whole thing had told on his nerves and he was exaggerating, and yet the episode of the previous evening, the mysterious business of the drinks, lent colour to his warning. Besides, Vincey was not the man to exaggerate.

George noticed that Harry had lashed his lemon squash with gin; and he followed his example. He wanted a pick-me-up.

The business is getting too damned complicated, he thought. The only positive thing seems to be that Vincey, who has probably a pretty big personal debt to settle (George had never heard of the Society of Nobles), has a surprise packet in store for Jakobsen which will blow him and the S.I.B.V. sky-high, if it does not blow Vincey up first. Avril is in love with Vincey, and Vincey is presumably in love with Baroness Lewel, judging from what I saw last night—and she is in the other camp—or he may be playing a game with her; there is always that possibility; in which case he had better be careful. Jakobsen knows that I have been setting people against him in England, and he has got the wind up so badly that he

thinks it is worth while putting me out of the way; which shows that the *Société Internationale de Bonne Volonté* etcetera, rests on a very uncertain foundation.

George finished his drink and lit a cigarette. There are two alternatives, he said to himself: to tell Avril the whole thing now, get her to shut up the house and go to America for six months, leaving Vincey to stew in his own juice (that was the sensible plan, but would she take it, if suggested, things being as they were?), or to say nothing, keep his eyes open, lend Vincey a hand in an unobtrusive sort of way, and pray that he would be successful. If Avril was in danger, George's course was clear. She must be told everything at once, but Vincey had said that she was not in danger, and George believed Vincey. He was one of those men whom one believes implicitly, without question, over a matter like that. His job might necessitate his lying like Ananias all day long; but George was willing to bet his chance of salvation that he would not say that Avril was in no danger, unless he really thought so. And, after all, it was her money they were after, not Avril herself, and they could only get that with her free consent. Anything in the nature of an abduction and a forced signature to a cheque would be worse than useless; even multi-millionairesses cannot sign cheques for two million dollars off-hand; there is stock to be sold, lawyers to be interviewed, half a hundred formalities to be gone through.

Jakobsen is up a gum-tree, that is what it is, thought George. Unless he can get a lot of money, quick, he is done for. People are beginning to get suspicious and ask questions, and unless he can avert suspicion by delivering an instalment of the goods, so to speak, he will have the whole press of Europe after him. And Avril is his only chance: the only other people rich enough to help him would want to know a bit more about where

their money was going, and would insist on being able to control it. He was counting on Avril, and Vincey and I have upset his calculations. If it were not for us, she would have handed over the money by now. No wonder he does not like us! And my gingering up of London is the last thing in the world he wants. It is . . .

A step sounded behind him, and he looked round quickly. It was Avril's English butler.

"The London papers, sir."

"Is it twelve o'clock already?"

"It is ten minutes to twelve, sir. The train was unusually punctual to-day."

George took the *Cosmos* from Grove, the superb, impassive Grove, whose perfect manner was the despair of sensitive but ignorant Frenchmen, who do not understand that butling is as much an art as architecture.

After glancing at the summary, he turned to the leading articles. The first was headed "A new conference?", the second "International Philanthropy."

"It is surely quite time that a review should be made of the progress of the *Société Internationale de Bonne Volonté et de Secours Mutuel*, the great scheme of international charity about which we heard so much a few months ago. . . ."

That was it. To-day of all days, by a strange coincidence.

George read it to the end, and then lit a fresh cigarette. Good! Oh, damned good! Not too strong, just apprehensive. It must be all right really, but still it is rather strange. . . . That sort of thing. A little unkind to the directors, but that must be expected. It contained the germ of doubt. Clinging it was. . . . An article which, coming from the quarter it did, would have to be answered at once, if it were not to do untold harm. And the sting was in its tail, as it should be. "As the directors,

sulking like three Achilles in their tents, seem unwilling or unable to throw any light upon the work of the Society, it is to be hoped that Mr. Louis Jakobsen, the general secretary, a Russo-Dutch financier, who is believed to be the originator of the scheme, will be able to give a reassuring report of the Society's activities to those who have subscribed so generously towards it."

"Reassuring" a nasty word that. And a Russo-Dutch financier? Nothing in it really, but as a description it was not perhaps . . . well, reassuring. The *Cosmos* had started the ball rolling. The *Cosmos* had done it in a gentlemanly way. It would be interesting to see what the cad press had to say. George folded the paper up and put it under his arm. Through the window, he could see Jakobsen with Avril and Hilda on the other side of the lawn. Wanda and Colette, who seldom appeared before eleven-thirty, were watching Harry illustrating some intricate dance steps on the path.

George sauntered towards them.

"Good morning, Mr. Fennix," said Jakobsen with his invariable smile, holding out his hand. "I congratulate you. I hear you broke the bank last night."

"Yes, I had a good deal of luck one way and another last night," George replied with a twinkle, as he shook hands. "By the way, have you seen the *Cosmos* this morning? But, of course, you have not—what an idiot I am! You are the subject of a leading article: or perhaps I should say your society. One always thinks of Monsieur Louis Jakobsen and the S.I.B.V. as being interchangeable terms. However, they mention you by name, and it is part of our British creed that to be mentioned by name in a leading article in the *Cosmos* is to have attained fame—a serious matter of congratulation."

"I am flattered," Jakobsen returned composedly. "Is that the paper there? May I look at it?"

George opened the paper, and indicated the place.

Jakobsen read the article carefully. His face gave not the slightest sign of anything he may have felt.

"An interesting article," he said, as he handed the paper back, "but, if you will excuse my saying so, rather prejudiced. I must ask your brother what he thinks of it when he arrives. He is coming on Monday, isn't he?"

George nodded, and Jakobsen turned to Avril.

"Well, Duchesse, my sister and I will say good-bye now, or rather *au revoir* as you have so kindly asked us to dine to-morrow night. It is very good of you to allow us to bring our friend, Mr. von Arndt. He will be highly honoured. We are meeting him right now in Monte Carlo for lunch at the Hotel de Paris. He is only with us for a fortnight and then he goes back to Constantinople."

The name Arndt meant nothing to George.

He made his way over to the Baroness. "I executed your commission," he said, as he bent over her hand to say good-bye. She thanked him with her eyes.

CHAPTER X

IN WHICH WE MEET VINCEY'S FRIEND, THE DOCTOR, AND JAKOBSEN CALLS A CONFERENCE

“WELL, Avril?” said George, when Jakobsen and the Baroness had shot up the drive in a yellow and black Renault like a gigantic wasp. This tremendous insect was conducted insolently by a boyish chauffeur with a peevish face, while his lord and lady behind him vied with each other in impassivity. . . .

“What a bother it all is,” Avril said plaintively, leading the way to the morning-room. “It seems I have put Mr. Jakobsen in an awful hole. I did half promise the money, you know; and he has been counting on it. When he talks about the S.I.B.V. he makes it sound the most wonderful thing on earth, generous and big and real, so different from the grubby little schemes that always go wrong because they are so petty, and the mincing, stunted charities with which we rich people delude ourselves into thinking that we are doing our bit in the world. And then you and Julian Vincey whisper doubt like two conspirators into the other ear and make me feel like a tenderfoot in a poker game. . . . Oh, dear! As Mrs. Hylton-Banbury said after being presented all of a sudden to the ex-Kaiser at Homburg about a hundred years ago, ‘I feel just sick in the stomach!’”

“Vincey and I are not the only people who are doubtful about the S.I.B.V.,” George remarked, tapping the *Cosmos*, which he still held in his hand.

"But is not that your doing?" Avril asked shrewdly. "Mr. Jakobsen said you were the most dangerous enemy the scheme had. What was it he said exactly? Oh, yes! That like all people with strong principles, you had also strong prejudices, and that because you had taken a dislike to the scheme you were doing all you could to wreck it."

"And I bet he added that if I did not like it, the decent thing to do was to leave it alone," said George with a short laugh.

"Not in so many words. I thought he was very nice about you on the whole. He guesses perfectly well that it was on account of you that I refused the money the other day. . . ."

"And Vincey," interrupted George. "It is not fair that I should bear the whole weight of that momentous decision."

"Oh! He does not know anything about Mr. Vincey's prejudices."

Avril sank into her accustomed seat in the corner of the sofa at right angles to the fire-place.

"And you did not enlighten him, I hope."

"Of course not. It is bad enough for him to know that he has one enemy in the household. George, what is it that you have got against the S.I.B.V.?"

"Everything," said George shortly.

"No, not everything. You explained 'everything' the other day. What is 'it'? There is always an 'it' when one searches for it: some one thing which turns one's indifference into active animosity. . . . Dislike is seldom cumulative; and animosity is usually provoked by the violation of a secret prejudice, an unsuspected something, sacred to ourselves alone. You will be much more likely to convince me if you tell me what it is. I know it is not a selfish dislike to seeing me part with such a lot of

money, because you are not like that, thank God! And as I told you the other day, I was inadvertently such a disgusting war-profiteer that I feel I owe a great deal of money to the world. I have given a lot away, I know, but not a tithe of what I made out of the Winspear gun, the Winspear automatic pistol, and all the other Winspear horrors during the war. If I gave two million dollars, as I had intended, to the S.I.B.V. it would ensure its success—anyhow Mr. Jakobsen says it would—and it would help to quiet my conscience. You said the other day that you did not like the people who were mixed up in it, and that you suspected it of really being a political organization ‘camouflaged’ as charity. Have you any proof of that?”

“We very soon should have, if you let Jakobsen have the handling of your two millions,” George returned tartly. “What a danger you millionaires are to the world with your generous gestures! If only you could spend it selfishly, bathe in liquid gold, and have a new Rolls Royce every day, it would be so much better. The Russian revolution was paved with good intentions.”

“What has the Russian revolution got to do with it?” asked Avril, wrinkling her brows.

“Ask Jakobsen that next time you see him,” snapped George. “But you are wrong. There is no one thing I hate about the S.I.B.V.: it is everything. It is nothing but a millionaire-trap, and you, Avril de Lorges de Cheverney-Bouillon, are walking straight into it. That is what you are doing. You are an unworthy daughter of a shrewd, clever father. That is what you are. You are as bad as Mrs. Rebecca Partridge. . . .”

“Who?” gasped Avril, taken aback.

“Mrs. Rebecca Partridge, a middle-western lady, who had inherited millions and an ill-regulated conscience, and was a judgment unto women. Vincey will tell you

about her. I can hear your father, who in a sensible, level-headed way was the most generous man I ever met, using words that are frightening the cherubs. He is wondering what in thunder his daughter is doing coquetting with a bare-faced swindle only fit to deceive the last generation of the British peerage, run by a plump Russo-Dutch financier, whose good manner and clean fingernails are a warning in themselves; he is wondering why she does not listen to her Uncle George, who is all too well versed in the wickedness of the world—God help him—and sees through the S.I.B.V. like a piece of tissue paper; and he is saying to himself that if her conscience is in such a bad way—and being a strong, big-hearted man with a distinctly superior headpiece, he has not too much sympathy with the twitchings and cricks and convulsions of conscience—why does she not give her surplus to hospitals she knows about, or to cancer research, to something that is not suspect? That is what your father is saying to himself, Avril.”

Mme. de Cheverney became thoughtful.

“I wonder,” she murmured at length. “Supposing it were the big, splendid thing it professes to be, and it were still-born because one doubter would not risk money, which she does not want, to see it properly brought into the world, and started on its career. Supposing that were the case, George. It would not be a pleasant thing to have on one’s conscience.”

“Better that than to find that the problematical infant was a criminal degenerate with homicidal tendencies,” returned George stoutly. “But if you take my advice you will talk it over with Vincey. . . .”

“Your ally!”

George laughed. “If you like. But a level-headed young man who has seen a bit of the world and knows when generosity should be tempered by caution. I called

Vincey a man of mystery this morning, and he is in his way, but that does not mean that I do not trust him. I do. I think he is as straight as a die. . . .”

Avril put her finger to her lips, and Fennix stopped short. Vincey was coming towards them from the conservatory.

“Here is Mr. Vincey,” observed Avril with a smile as he joined them. “I am so sorry to hear about the accident to your wrist. It hurts, doesn’t it? You are looking quite seedy.”

Vincey was certainly looking worn and pale under his tan. His wound was giving him a certain amount of pain, and the manifold excitements of the night added to strain and lack of sleep had told on him. Avril held out her hand in a friendly way.

Vincey bent over it and raised it to his lips.

That young man will give himself away, if he is not careful, George thought to himself. The action was a perfectly natural one . . . to Prince Ternine. Abroad, in society, it is the usual thing to kiss a woman’s hand, but Englishmen, even cosmopolitan ones, use the privilege sparingly, and never with their own countrywomen—and Avril, in spite of her marriage, was essentially Anglo—and not Franco-American. Vincey, worried and *distracted*, had simply done the thing that came naturally to him. Avril blushed slightly. Coming from her son’s English tutor, usually so desperately correct and formal, it was a charming gesture of homage; and coming from Vincey it thrilled her. . . .

And then something happened.

While her fingers were resting in his, Vincey looked up and met her eyes. He shivered suddenly and said, “Ah,” quickly, surprised, almost startled, as though he had unexpectedly found the answer to a riddle that had been puzzling him.

He dropped her hand and turned away. Avril looked slightly perplexed. George, who had not missed a movement, said conversationally: "Why have you asked them to dinner to-morrow, and who is Arndt?"

"Herr von Arndt is a friend who is staying with them for a few days," replied Avril coolly. "One does not like Germans, of course, but it is silly to be petty-minded about it. Not to receive them only makes all this hate and nationalism and silliness worse, I always think. He is an engineer, who has been working on some railway contract for the Turkish Government. And I have asked them to dinner, because I promised Mr. Jakobsen to reconsider my refusal of the other day and to give him a definite answer to-morrow night."

"I see!" George nodded his head slowly, meaningly.

Said Vincey, strangely white, his hand on the same revolving book-case from which Colette's purse had fallen and belched forth its booty the night before, "The car is there and Mme. Brandstetter is waiting in the hall. If you don't mind, I will come into Nice with you. I want to see a doctor about my wrist."

"There. I knew it was bad," said Avril sympathetically. "Why did you not send someone for Dr. Fournier from Cap d'Ail? You could have had it seen to hours ago."

"I have a friend in Nice . . . a doctor. It is nothing; just wants binding up. . . ."

Shy and nervous Vincey was of a sudden; his habitual composure seemed to have deserted him.

"As you like," said Avril. "Sometime I want to have a talk with you, Mr. Vincey. George says you have got a level head; and I think so too. He calls you his ally. . . ."

"You called him that," smiled George.

"Did I? Well, just so that he cannot say I was afraid, Mr. Vincey?"

George, Colette and Vincey were fifty yards down the road in their car, when Winspear's Hispano, with the laconic Dr. Parker on board, swept into the drive from the other direction.

Thus it happened that Vincey's second meeting with Dr. Parker was postponed.

Vincey knew nothing about Dr. Parker in the Winspear connection. Dr. Parker was an afterthought that morning, if you remember. Vincey just apprehended vaguely that people were coming to lunch. . . . There were always people coming to lunch. So he fled. He was tired, excruciatingly tired. . . .

He parted from Colette and George at the corner of the Promenade des Anglais in Nice, outside the revolving doors of the Hotel Ruhl, which vomited women in white with lips the colour of lobsters and Homburg-hatted cavaliers with Assyrian beards and platinum watch-chains, when they were not engulfing other women in white with lips the colour of ripe tomatoes and freshly-shaven cavaliers, wearing straw hats and platinum wrist watches. He bought a paper at a *kiosk*, a local paper, a most convenient journal in that it contained so little news that it could be read comfortably in under two minutes; strolled past the wonderful flower-filled windows of Savona, and turned into a doorway, surmounted by the word "Cintra" in discreet lettering.

A long panelled room with a bar. Tables. Two and a half barmen in abbreviated white jackets. Barrels with taps. Settees with leather backs. Port; which the French drink as an *apéritif*, thinking it an English custom, very fashionable. Oysters. Three Americans with cigars and a bottle of the "boy." Two women and a man, eating anchovy sandwiches. Two men and a woman eating caviare sandwiches. A tired Englishman sipping a cocktail at the bar.

Vincey sat down at a little table in the corner. The half-barman took his order—two sandwiches, one whisky-and-soda. A whole barman executed it and exchanged a few cautious words with him in Russian. They had served in the same regiment before Przemysl, which was a grey Austrian fortress and is the home of many dead. The barman had been a count then. Now he was called Charlie. The other barman was also called Charlie; and when the half-barman grew a little older and a little bigger, he, too, would be called Charlie, if he were not called George.

Vincey munched his sandwiches, drank his whisky and called for his bill. It came to eleven francs. He put down thirteen, slipped the bill in his pocket and went out without looking to right or left.

On reaching the flower market he stopped, as all right-minded people do, to admire the flowers.

Having decided that he was not being followed, he read what was written on the back of his bill, made a little ball of it and pushed it through the grating with the point of his stick. Then he plunged into a narrow street filled with vegetables and Italians, turned into another, even narrower, also filled with Italians but devoid of vegetables, and entered a wine shop, for the moment empty except for an enormous man with closely cropped red hair, and a genial smile. At the sight of Vincey his smile broadened, and he opened a door leading into the back part of the house.

"Serafina!" he called.

A young woman, as beautiful as a Madonna by the Perugian, appeared from the kitchen wiping her hands on her apron, long tapering hands, red with washing.

The big man indicated Vincey with a nod, and the young woman looked at him shrewdly, suspiciously. Vincey touched his breast lightly with the first two fingers

of his left hand. The girl, for she was little more, smiled, nodded and led the way through the kitchen into a malodorous back-yard, surrounded by a high wall. In the wall there was a door.

"The doctor is in," she said in Italian, "I saw him in the garden from our top window twenty minutes ago."

Vincey thanked her prettily in the same tongue, gave the red-haired man who had followed them a five franc note with which to drink his health, and passed through the door in the wall which the young woman held open for him.

He found himself in a fair-sized garden, beautifully kept. In the shade of a great palm tree a middle-aged man, tall, slim and strikingly handsome, with a fair pointed beard, sat drinking coffee and reading a slim book of philosophy by Benedetto Croce.

"Ah!" he murmured, raising his eyebrows slightly at sight of Vincey, and rang a little bell on the table by him. It was answered by an elderly red-faced man-servant in a coquettish striped apron.

"More coffee."

Vincey sat down. They talked, or rather Vincey did. At the end of ten minutes they rose and entered the house. It was much bigger than it appeared to be from the garden, airy and filled with treasures. On the landing, on the way to the first floor, Vincey stopped to admire a Boulle cabinet, an authentic piece of great beauty, which one would have expected to find in a museum rather than in a private house.

"That represents an operation on . . ." observed the doctor casually, and he mentioned the name of a world-famous cinema actress. "Only once in my career have I had an exactly similar case. It was Princess G. . . . I went all the way to Moscow to operate, and she paid me a thousand pounds. She is in Nice to-day . . . runs a

Russian cabaret. I go there now and again and we talk over old times."

In the bathroom the doctor dressed Vincey's wound which, he assured him, was getting on well, thanks to Dr. Parker's prompt treatment of the night before.

As they returned through the bedroom he pointed to a basin and jug of solid silver on the wash-stand, rich, Russian, flamboyant.

"That was given to my father by the late Viscount Fennix, the father of Mme. de Cheverney's uncle, when he was British Ambassador in Petersburg, curiously enough. My father and he were friends; and it was his parting present when he was recalled."

In the long cool library looking onto the garden, the doctor paused. "Between three and four o'clock on the morning of the eleventh, then. Everything will be ready. The first turn after the cross roads: don't forget and go careering on. And take care of yourself, Boris. I do not like these midnight reconnaissances, though you were wonderfully successful . . . the best bit of work we have done for a long time. Hanbury has been watched ever since he left Paris. You shall know at once if anything happens in that quarter. I will leave you to tell our friends in Monaco of the alteration in the date of Mme. de Cheverney's ball, as the less I am seen with them the better, but do not go to the house. I am pretty certain they have discovered at last which it is, and are watching it. You have some other way of communicating? Good."

A minute later, Vincey had passed through the wine shop and was in the narrow street behind the flower market.

Though still physically tired, he was mentally and morally refreshed. A wonderful man, that doctor! One of the most famous surgeons in Europe, a philosopher, an epicure, a friend of poets, an adventurer . . . he

seemed to be able to impart to others something of his own magic instinct for life. With him, so perfect was his mental poise, difficulties seemed to melt away, things fell easily into their proper place, life appeared in its true proportions; and one left him with a new store of strength. He was a member of the Executive Committee of the Society of Nobles, and he could not have discharged his duties with greater coolness and with more meticulous attention to detail if it had been the committee of a hospital.

Vincey made his way back to the bottom of the Avenue de la Victoire, boarded a tram for the station, caught a train by the skin of his teeth, descended at the toy-like station of Eze, with its palms and brilliant flower beds, gratefully accepted a lift from a disillusioned youth with an adhesive cigarette, who was driving a motor-van from the Galeries Lafayette in Nice and chanced to be passing, hopped off a mile further along the road, and entered the grounds of the Villa Cheverney. It was just half-past two.

In the hall, he met Grove, who at once became solicitous about luncheon—Grove liked Vincey; he was a “real” gentleman—and informed him that the house-party had finished and were drinking their coffee in the conservatory. But Vincey had had something to eat in Nice, and wanted to make up for his sleepless night. Grove understood. But perhaps Mr. Vincey would like a liqueur brandy? Mr. Vincey would not, but he would like someone to wake him at half-past four, if he were asleep. Very good.

In five minutes he was dreaming.

A couple of hours later, when Vincey was awaking from his *sommeil réparateur*, Jakobsen, Lady Harriet and

Arndt met for a council of war in Lady Harriet's meretricious flat in Beausoleil, that elegant suburb flung like a splash of white plaster against the dark green slopes behind Monte Carlo. They were alone, for, after doing some very expensive shopping, Wanda had been taken home in the yellow and black Renault, which was like a wasp; Dr. Rakoff was sulking in his pavilion; and Captain Tuff was passing the afternoon in his own peculiar fashion—punting when he was not drinking, and drinking when he was not punting.

Bertie Tuff's system was a simple one. He never gambled more than three hundred francs at a sitting, and he never bet more than thirty francs at a time. As soon as he had lost his three hundred francs or, as occasionally happened, won three hundred francs, he stopped playing and went to the nearest bar for a drink . . . or drinks. Then he started again at another table. For nothing in the world would he play a second time at a table if one remained at which he had not played; and no run of luck, good or bad, would persuade him to break his three hundred franc rule. As a system it was no more idiotic than any other, and it gave his thirst a chance.

"So she has promised to think it over." It was Arndt speaking. He was sitting in a low chair in Lady Harriet's boudoir, smartly dressed in blue serge and white spats over patent leather shoes. The jab in the arm he had received from Vincey's hunting knife had proved a very trifling affair, and his solar plexus was in good working order again.

"She has; but I am not counting on her reverting to her original offer. She may, though I doubt it. Anyhow, I am conceding Fennix that point, and am basing everything on the supposition that her refusal holds." Jakobsen paused and lit a cigarette daintily. "If she changes

her mind and hands over that two million, well and good—if she does not, we shall have to make her . . . only it will be four million, not two.”

He spoke with a sort of matter-of-fact confidence that rather impressed the other two, who were depressed and consequently inclined to be savage.

“How are you going to manage that, Louis?” asked Lady Hetty doubtfully, perching herself on the arm of Arndt’s chair.

Jakobsen went to the door leading into the drawing-room and flung it suddenly open. He then peered into the passage.

“There is no one about,” Lady Hetty said. “None of the servants speak a word of English, and Bertie is out.”

Jakobsen approached them and bent down, one hand on the arm of the chair, the other on Lady Harriet’s knee. He whispered something and then straightened himself.

Arndt whistled.

“Can it be done?”

“It can, and it has got to be done. It is our one chance,” Jakobsen replied firmly. “After seeming to hold every card in the pack we are losing trick after trick. Fennix has attacked us with the one weapon against which we cannot defend ourselves adequately. I shall write a letter to the *Cosmos* of course, answering their article: there is no difficulty about that, and to leave it unanswered would be fatal. But the damage is done! That article is merely the first of many. Unless I can counter-attack by proving that the S.I.B.V. is a going concern, unless I can summon my directors to decide on the site in Berne, upon which we have an option, unless I can sign the contract for the building and pay a fat deposit; unless I can restore confidence, we may as well quit now and be thankful to get away with whole skins before the edifice crashes and

raises a dust to be seen from San Francisco to Vladivostok via Paris. And I can only do that by getting a stranglehold on Mme. de Cheverney, who is the third richest woman in the world. Now, do you see how we stand? And each day that passes increases the sum of money I must have by fifteen to twenty thousand dollars. A fortnight ago, two million down would have helped along nicely. Now, with Fennix making the pace so hot, it is not enough. Besides I can see that two million, given of her own free will, will not be an instalment as I hoped: it will be once for all, and finish—*fertig schluss!* as Franz here would say. For that reason, if we are to get the money in the way I have suggested, we may as well have four millions as two. I admit it is a pretty dangerous and desperate plan, but, if it comes off, she will be prepared to pay anything."

"That is true," grunted Arndt from the depths of his chair. "I wish you would tell us, Louis, just as a matter of curiosity, where all the money that has been collected has gone to. You must have had the handling of some ten million dollars altogether."

"It has gone to those short-sighted fools in Moscow," Jakobsen replied sharply. "Instead of letting me get the organization going so that they could milk the world at their leisure, they must grab the first money that comes in, the capital upon which the whole thing depends, for some fat-headed propaganda scheme or other. It is sickening! Sickening, that is what it is! I just can't bear to think of it, it drives me so wild. It will be their own fault if we fail, them and their brilliant envoy Dr. Rakoff. I could have murdered him last night after that greaser got away with the goods on him."

Arndt coughed. "Look here, Louis, you tell us in your lordly way that you are quite satisfied with Wanda's explanation of what occurred last night, plunging us into

darkness and all that, but Hetty and I would rather like to hear what the explanation was. You see, it was entirely through her turning out the light that he managed to get away, and, if he was a Society of Nobles man, and it is a *mille* note to a match-end that he was, the consequences are going to be devilish serious."

Jakobsen frowned. Lady Harriet opened her mouth to say something, but Arndt pinched her leg. He wished to treat their leader tactfully if possible, and Lady Hetty was not given to mincing her words.

"What happened was this," he said coldly. "Wanda had left the book she was reading downstairs. She was coming down to get it. . . ."

"Why did she not send her maid?" Lady Harriet said quickly.

Jakobsen gave her a malevolent look.

"Because her maid had orders not to wait up for her and had gone to bed hours before. And the book was Bourget's '*Némésis*.' I happen to know she was reading it, and I found the book in the library afterwards," he snapped in a now-are-you-satisfied voice. "At the top of the stairs she saw us all down in the hall. She saw cutey fling his gun on Franz, and she switched out the light with the result that Sergei got plugged instead. . . . Then she lost her head as well she might. Wanda is a woman, not a steel-wire devil like you, Hetty. Instead of turning on the light again, she ran back to her room scared to death. When I went up afterwards she was in a faint on the floor."

Arndt and Hetty kept silence.

"Are you satisfied?"

Arndt had heard that tone of voice once or twice before.

"Yes, of course," he said quickly. "We only wanted to know what it was. It is so damned funny happening just on top of the Fennix business—seems as if every-

thing was working against us. This is . . . well, plausible, understandable, but that! Who could have monkeyed with the decanter after Louis had seen to it, Hetty?"

"It is a bloody mystery," Lady Harriet replied. "Colette did pass this room going from the music-room to get her cloak, but she was only away a minute. I suspected her at first—she seemed the only person who could have done it—but the more I think about it, the more certain I am that she did not. For one thing she had not time, for another the only way she could have known anything about it was by seeing Louis doctor the decanter, and he does not think that that was possible—anyhow, if she had, she would not have dared *do* anything. She is much too soft. Besides why should she do anything? She knows her game is to keep in with us. She knows what would happen to her if she tried playing tricks, or rather she must guess . . . and she is not the sort. She is clever enough, but flabby, no guts."

"Are you going to use her for this new job?" Arndt asked Jakobsen.

"No. I agree with Hetty that Colette had nothing to do with it, but all the same it would be much too dangerous to use her. She has not got the nerve. Besides no one outside us three must know. We will have to do the job ourselves."

"What day is it for?"

"The eleventh—some time about midnight. The ball was for the ninth, but it has been changed."

"You have not succeeded in discovering whose car it was that the chap got away in last night?" Lady Harriet enquired, getting up from the arm of Arndt's chair and moving over to the window.

"No. Daren't make too many enquiries. I reported an attempted burglary to the police this morning, and said the man used a gun when we chased him off, to

cover up any rumours that might be flying about. We made the devil of a noise."

"How tall is Vincey?" asked Arndt, lighting his straight-grained pipe, supplied by Mr. Dunhill.

"The height of the chap last night," replied Jakobsen laconically.

"The same build?"

"Yes."

"Any reason why it should not have been Vincey?"

"None that I know of; but I only saw him during those few seconds before the light went out, and afterwards when I potted at him on the way to the door. I must have hit him, too, for there was blood on the floor by the door—a little."

"You've got Vincey on the brain," exclaimed Lady Harriet scornfully. "Louis would have known Vincey all right, if it had been him. I should have."

"Oh, you!" laughed Arndt. "I should like to know all the same what became of your friend Vincey after he left here last night."

Lady Harriet made a suggestion, but Arndt said that that needed corroboration as much as anything else.

"What do you think, Louis?" Arndt asked. "Do you suspect this Vincey, or do you think he is all right?"

"I suspect everyone," Jakobsen answered shortly. "Where are you going, Hetty?"

"Whisky-and-soda. Franz wants a drink—so do I. Have anything?"

Jakobsen shook his head. "I am one of Nature's tee-totallers. I would as soon pour arsenic at stated intervals into my stomach as alcohol."

"Seriously, Louis," pursued Arndt, while Lady Harriet was out of the room, "do you suspect Vincey? I have never seen him and know nothing about him except what I have heard from Hetty, so I cannot judge. But I have

noticed one thing in the course of my long and intimate acquaintance with her ladyship and that is that the people she favours have usually something more to recommend them than a good character and gentle manners. In other words they are usually pretty tough. To start with, is Vincey Hetty's lover?"

"No. He is not, you filthy-minded Hun," Lady Harriet observed unconcernedly from the doorway. "Clear the table, can't you? Do you expect me to put the tray on the floor?"

"Personally," said Jakobsen thoughtfully, "I don't suppose I have talked to Vincey, more than just saying 'good morning,' half a dozen times—not that even. He has always struck me as intelligent and I should think he is out to make what he can from his position. I don't suppose he regards tutoring as a sacred vocation. I have not the slightest reason to suspect him. I go by what Hetty says. She knows him; I do not. He is certainly tall and of about the same build as our greaser last night, but so are lots of people. He was recommended for his present post by Horace P. Loman—I know that for a fact—and that is rather in his favour than otherwise—shows he is genuine, as Loman is not the sort of man to plant a friend with someone he does not know a good deal about."

"Vincey's all right," Lady Harriet said impatiently, mixing two stiff drinks. "We'll get him here and you shall see for yourself."

"Try to arrange for me to meet him, Hetty," said Arndt, raising his glass. "I do not doubt he is all you say, but I should like to have a look at him. For a man who is of no particular importance he seems to be a pretty consistent subject of conversation, I notice."

CHAPTER XI

IN WHICH VINCEY DOES A LITTLE GAMBLING AT MONTE CARLO, AND HERR VON ARNDT CANNOT MAKE UP HIS MIND

VINCEY awoke mightily refreshed. His two hours' sleep had completely restored his strength and vigour; and he had lost that sense of moral depression which goes with excessive fatigue and nerve-strain. He felt blithe and alert, ready to deal with any side of the complex and ever-changing situation which should present itself.

His first thought was to get in touch with his friends in Monaco. They would have to be notified of the change in the date of the Cheverney ball. Now that their headquarters were being watched, it was none too easy a job. It was one of Vincey's strictest principles never to use the post, telegraph or telephone service for direct communication with them if he could possibly avoid it. Too many schemes had gone awry through mislaid letters and overheard telephone conversations, and he was taking no chances. Their success depended on his being able to ward off suspicion until the fateful eleventh; and if he was connected by Jakobsen in any way with the shabby house in Monaco, or if he was seen talking to anyone, whom he was unlikely to have met in the official course of his life, it would be just sufficient to consolidate any misapprehensions they might have about him. Misapprehensions! He hoped they were only misapprehensions. In spite of Wanda's assurances to the contrary in

the note she had managed to get to him that morning, he was by no means sure that he had not been recognized the previous night—by no means sure! That, however, was one of the many things which had to be chanced. But how was he to get word to his friends? Vincey lit a cigarette and considered. He had a swift though rather risky way of communicating with them, but they had agreed only to use that in emergencies—and this was not an emergency; there was another way, less risky and more certain, but that took time—and he wanted to get in touch with them at once. The Rooms! How stupid of him not to think of it at once—they had arranged a cipher to meet just such a case; and the telephoning involved in his plan was negligible as regards risk. He and the Doctor in their talk that mid-day had made a slight alteration in the hour that the *coup* was to take place, and it was important that they should hear that immediately and from him personally; for, as a measure of prudence, the Doctor seldom emerged from his beautiful house in Nice, where he sat weaving his fine-spun net. . . . Events were following too fast upon one another to relegate such intelligence to an uncertain future. He might be put out of action; anything might happen, if Jakobsen and his friends suspected him. One of the many conveniences of the Villa Cheverney was the number of telephones that had been installed since Avril and Courtney had bought the property the year after the war. As each private sitting-room was furnished with one there was no need to take all the world into one's confidence by ringing up from the hall, or to retire furtively to the lobby occupied by one's host's coats, sticks, and mackintoshes to do one's telephoning, as is the depressing necessity in nearly all houses whose inmates do not boast a strain of practical trans-Atlantic blood. Sitting at his writing-table, Vincey rang up the Hotel de Londres in Monte Carlo and asked

for Mr. Fugger; Mr. Fugger, known to the hotel as a Swiss banker who paid his considerable weekly bill with unfailing regularity and as a client who gave discreet dinner parties at which a few well-turned-out cosmopolitan gentlemen ate and drank of the very best the hotel could provide, was out, but Vincey was given to understand that the concierge would deliver any message the gentleman would like to leave.

"Please tell Mr. Fugger, when he comes in, that Mr. Babenhausen will be in the Rooms at ten o'clock to-night," he said, and rang off. That will fetch him, he thought, and he will warn the other two. There would be little difficulty about getting into Monte Carlo. Winspear, who was always game for a gamble, would take him in, and once in the Rooms he could give his message without opening his lips!

That settled, he lit a pipe and flung himself into a chair. He wanted to think. What part was Wanda going to play in all this? Was she going to be useful to him, or was she going to be a complication and a danger which he had not counted? She had saved his life last night by switching out the light at the critical moment—there was no doubt about that—but he was hideously worried by the letter she had conveyed to him that morning. Her recognition of him, the dramatic circumstances of their previous meeting, so overlaid for him by more recent events, had come as a bolt from the blue, an extraordinary coincidence of which he had promptly determined to take full advantage. It had seemed a wonderful piece of good luck. But now he was not sure that it was not going to be a disaster of the first magnitude.

He tried to recall in detail their interview of the previous night. First of all, she had called him by his name, and that had brought him as quickly to his senses as a shower of cold water would have done—and then she

had talked! How she had talked! At first, he could not make head or tail of what she was saying, and then he began to get a glimmering of the truth. She was an ally from the clouds. She would help him against Jakobsen . . . whether from love of him or hate of Jakobsen or both, he could not make out. It was all he could do to find a thread in her talk, so rambling, so inconsequent, so elliptical was it. At this very moment he did not know with any precision what her relations with Jakobsen were. He gathered that her marriage to Baron Lewel had taken place when she was barely seventeen and that he had died six months later of pneumonia, not in the war as was generally supposed. She was not Jakobsen's sister, but he had not the faintest idea whether she was married to him or whether she was just living with him. . . . But she was prepared to betray him. How she had talked! Her feelings in the days that followed his rescue of her from the Volga, her thoughts, her dreams . . . wild, fantastic talk, as she held his hands. Was she in love with him? He imagined so, but only God knew! With a French or an English woman, there would be no doubt about it, but he knew the Russian soul and its swift sudden moments of exaltation, its hysterical crises. . . . And then she had flung herself into his arms and they had kissed. He was a hot-blooded man and she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen; and yet that kiss meant nothing to him. As she had devoured his lips, he had been thinking, thinking . . . and longing to look round to make sure that they were alone. Cold-blooded, beastly . . . but there it was. At the time he had wondered how it was she did not move him. She was ravishingly beautiful, ardent, touching in her tenacious hold on her girlhood's dream, and yet he had remained completely unmoved. Now he knew why. He had discovered when he kissed Avril's hand that morning.

In her letter, beyond saying that Jakobsen had no suspicion that he was the masked man, and that it was wrong of him to have gone to the villa after she had told him of the danger he would inevitably run, there was no mention of the hundred and one things he wanted to know. It was a prose poem, a wild outpouring of her soul . . . and a postscript asking him to arrange a meeting soon. "Something must be decided. Things cannot go on like this. We must find the fairy island of our dreams."

That postscript worried Vincey badly.

You see, he had no dreams, at least none that he shared with Wanda. Up till that very day the only dream that he had ever caressed and indulged was a vision of the overthrow of the Soviet Government and its replacement by a liberal constitution. Now he was not so certain that he had not another dream, but that again had nothing to do with Wanda's fairy island, for it concerned a tawny-haired goddess with eyes the colour of periwinkles, a tall slender goddess as wilful as the April after which she was named.

He had brushed her hand with his lips, and that contact of courtesy had thrilled him to his marrow, as he had not been thrilled by Wanda's kiss.

Let us do Vincey justice. He was a gentleman, *un homme de cœur*. If Wanda was in love with him, he was dreadfully sorry. It was not of his seeking, for no reasonable person can consider the return of a kiss an avowal of love, and his primary feeling was one of sorrow for her, not unmixed with a sense of embarrassment that he was unable to accept gladly what so many people (poor Winspear for example) sought in vain. After that came annoyance, angry annoyance that the Fates had played him such an idiotic trick. A complication of this sort might easily wreck his carefully laid plans and cost him

his life. Wanda's letter was a wild imprudence, and in her present state of exaltation Heaven alone knew what she might do when she found that he did not reciprocate her passion. Instead of helping him she might ruin him. He knew himself to be incapable of playing a double game, pretending to be in love with her . . . it was a thing he was physically incapable of doing. He had always met women on honourable terms, and even if he could bring himself to attempt such a thing, a school girl would see through him. It was damnable.

"Her Grace would like to speak to you, sir, if you are disengaged."

Now for a battle over the two millions for the S.I.B.V. Vincey thought, as he made his way towards Avril's room. How should he go about it? He had not an idea; but it suddenly struck him that George Fennix's failed through being too provocative. He was epigrammatic and aggressive and that rubbed Avril up the wrong way. It made her want to go counter to his advice out of sheer perversity.

Avril was very gracious, as was her wont. Why had she not seen him at tea? Some nice young things had come over to play tennis. Would he shut the door leading into the morning-room and then they would not be disturbed? She had wanted to have a good gossip with him for a long time, but with one thing and another there never seemed to be an opportunity. The cigarettes were on the table by him.

Jérôme.

Jérôme occupied fifteen minutes. When there seemed to be nothing more to say about Jérôme there was silence.

Courtney.

Avril was worried about Courtney. She could see that he was not happy. There were times when he looked perfectly miserable. She had come to think of Mr. Vincey

as a friend of the family and she felt she could speak openly to him. What did he think about it?

Vincey put it down to his unfortunate attachment to the Baroness Lewel (it was an open secret), and said that he expected he would get over it in time. A banal remark, and he knew it.

Avril hoped that he would, but Courtney did take things to heart so. And now would Mr. Vincey please tell her what he thought about the S.I.B.V.?

It came like that.

"Quite frankly," said Vincey, looking her straight between the eyes, "I do not like it at all."

"You think it is not genuine?"

"I know it is not," he replied without hesitation.

There was silence.

"Then you do not want me to give Mr. Jakobsen this money?" Avril said at length, rather low. Her head was bent, and she was examining a ring, an emerald set in diamonds, on her finger. Vincey had never heard her use quite that tone of voice before . . . humble.

"No, I do not," he said boldly.

"Very well, then, I will not."

There was another silence, and then she raised her eyes to his. Vincey took her hand and, bending down, kissed it—a long, long kiss. He could feel her fingers trembling against his lips.

Avril rose and stood leaning against the mantelpiece gazing into the fire.

"What is all this mystery?"

Vincey said nothing.

"I am following your advice blindly, you know. I am putting myself in your hands. Are you sure, quite sure, that I am acting wisely?"

"Quite sure." There was a note of gladness, almost of triumph, in his voice which made her look up.

"That is what I wanted to know. If you tell me it is all right . . ."

"It is all right," said Vincey. He rose and moved a step towards her. They were nearly of a height. Their eyes met. Her hand fluttered at her breast, and a little sigh escaped her.

In another second Vincey would have spoken. The whole story would have been out, Avril would have been in his arms, and the chronicler would have had the uninteresting task of ending up this tale with wedding bells, and a honeymoon trip on Winspear's yacht far from the machinations of Jakobsen and Lady Hetty . . . but there was an interruption. It took the shape of Courtney Winspear in a far from lovelorn mood.

He was gay, merry, almost boisterous. Hard exercise affected Winspear that way. He was not particularly fond of lawn tennis—the only sports he really cared for were fencing and motor racing—but he needed a tremendous amount of exercise to keep his large body in order. And when it was in order he could make merry with the best of them.

"Hullo, 'ullo! What are you two plotting? Have not seen you all day, Vincey. By the way, how's the wrist? We missed you badly. Young Rattray's friend was not what you might call an accomplished performer. Even playing with Rattray he did not make a very good showing. Cousin Alexander and I took three straight sets off them."

"Who is 'Cousin Alexander'?" Vincey asked incuriously. What an infernal nuisance Winspear was! Why could not he have kept out of the room five minutes longer?

"He is a young American, a distant connection, who had introductions to me," Avril answered, biting her lip. "I asked him to lunch and tennis."

"He is a very decent bird, Alexander," Courtney remarked. "He has asked me to run into Monte Carlo and sup with him to-night at the Hotel de Paris. By the way, he wants you to go, too, Vincey, and George."

"Me! I've never met him."

"That does not matter. He has asked us all—all the men, that is to say. I rather fancy our young friend wishes to celebrate his birthday or something."

"Why don't you go, Mr. Vincey?" Avril said, and her eyes met his for a moment. She wanted breathing time. She wanted to be alone to think. She knew Vincey cared now, and she wanted to savour the knowledge: and she wanted to search her own heart, to make sure that it was the real thing, the love which she had never known, the love of which she had dreamed.

It was the opportunity Vincey wanted.

"I should like to," he said, and then added, smiling, "I have a feeling my luck is in to-day. I might even risk a hundred francs at the tables."

When George Fennix appeared a few minutes later and heard of the invitation, he accepted it with alacrity. It was not that he had any overwhelming desire to make the acquaintance of Avril's American cousin, but he liked Monte Carlo, he liked the Hotel de Paris, and after having spent the greater part of the day in Colette's company he felt that he needed a little purely male society. Not that Colette was not piquante enough—far from it! He had enjoyed his day with her, and they had come to an understanding. . . . He knew now how she stood with regard to Jakobsen and Lady Hetty. She had told him everything, all she knew of the folk at Cap Martin, how she had met Lady Hetty at Florence shortly after the war, how Lady Hetty had proposed to her, on running across her here, that she should "earn a little pin money" by reporting on all that happened at the villa "for a rich pal

of mine who wants Avril to put money into a show of his," how she had refused, and then accepted, after she had lost the few thousand francs remaining to her at the tables, how she had read his letter (at this point her hand sought his under the rug—this was after lunch on the way to Antibes, where they spent the rest of the afternoon), how furious Jakobsen had been when she had repeated the contents of the letter to him, how she had seen Jakobsen the previous night at Lady Hetty's, doctoring the little decanter of whisky intended for her present companion, and how she had emptied it away and refilled the decanter with sherry, which accounted for the face George had made (silvery laughter; but George put his arms round her and kissed her—the car was a closed one). . . . The question now was whether Lady Hetty suspected the trick Colette had played on them. George was in two minds about it, but Colette thought she must suspect her . . . and she was badly scared! She went in terror of Lady Hetty. There had been a nasty scandal about Lady Hetty in Florence, when she was there. A young Italian *marchese*, very young, barely nineteen, who had been one of her followers, had shot himself and left a letter . . . they said he was mad. It was the only thing they could say. The things the letter contained were too horrible, and it was all about Lady Hetty from beginning to end. If you searched the sewers of antiquity . . . but there was only the word of a dead boy. . . . Ever since then she had been affected by Lady Harriet as a rabbit is by a snake. . . .

Colette was curious about Vincey—she could not make him out. She had spotted at once that he was there for something more important than Jérôme's education. She told George what Harry had said about the way Baroness Lewel had looked at Vincey, and George smiled. It bore out what he had seen himself the night before. Not that

he intended to bother his head about Vincey's love affairs. He trusted Vincey to look after himself. He did not think that young man did much without a purpose.

George was sure of Colette now. She liked him . . . well, more than liked him from what she said. He had relieved her for the time from embarrassment, and if she should be so foolish as to lose all her money at Monte Carlo again, the chances were that she would not try to repair the damage by having recourse to Jakobsen, when he, George, was there.

Of the many Colettes George had met in his time, he liked this one the best. She was a good sort at heart . . . and there was no doubt about it, she was damnably good-looking!

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There was an even greater crowd than usual in the Rooms that night, and it appeared a physical impossibility to get within punting distance of the tables. Winspear decided to wait in the atrium, where he had arranged to meet Dr. Parker; but Vincey, on the plea that he had a feeling that it was the psychological moment for him to play, passed through the doors into the *salles de jeux*, and George followed him.

George did not intend to play. His luck the previous night had been too good for him to tempt Providence again so soon, but he wanted to watch Vincey. There is scarcely anything that illustrates a man's character so clearly as his method of gambling.

The first table did not seem to appeal to Vincey, though there was a fairly convenient place from which to play between a tall thin man with a diamond shirt stud that was too good to be true and a perspiring lady in purple velvet. He looked round as though seeking something.

"What are you looking for?" George asked. "Inspiration?"

"I think this is the table for me," Vincey observed, making for the centre one. They edged their way through the throng. As they got near the table, a man rose and Vincey took his seat. George stood behind him. Immediately opposite them a clean-shaven, middle-aged man in a dinner jacket and black tie was playing solemnly and noting the run of the numbers on a card. George observed that he played exclusively on the first dozen. For two or three turns Vincey did not bet. Then he put a louis on five and lost. The next four turns he played 2, 4, 12, 1, all *en plein* and lost each time. The next turn he did not play. The clean-shaven man opposite, George noticed, deserted the first dozen for the first time since they had been at the table by backing zero.

Vincey got up.

"Can't do any good there. Let us try another table."

Vincey was as particular about choosing his second table as he had been about choosing the first. After wandering round for some minutes he seemed to find inspiration at the end table in the Salle Garnier by the entrance to the Nouvelle Salle Schmit. There were less people round it than round most of the others and they had no difficulty in getting within playing distance. Opposite them a big bearded man with tinted glasses was playing on the even chances.

After waiting a few turns, Vincey played 2, 6, 3, 12, 1, losing each time, and then stopped. The bearded man backed zero.

Vincey got up.

"Ten louis gone west. Something drastic will have to be done."

This time the breath of inspiration blew from the very next table, but Vincey made up for it by being very fanciful about the place he played from. There was an empty chair, but he insisted upon playing with great discomfort

from behind a very fat woman with an enormous picture-hat. Opposite them, an extremely smartly dressed young man—an Italian, George guessed—was playing the columns with unfailing regularity. He appeared to have been winning heavily.

Vincey let a few turns pass and then played 3, 4, 4, 12, 1, *en plein*. He lost the first four throws but won the last and received thirty-five louis and his stake. He tossed a louis to the croupier and waited. The young Italian backed zero.

Vincey got up.

"Net gain four hundred francs," he remarked. "I shall get a new hat to-morrow. I want one badly."

"Is that the last of them?" George enquired as they moved away from the table.

"Last of what?" Vincey asked, stopping to light a cigarette.

"The last of the people you wish to talk to in your cipher," George replied. "The numbers in each case made twenty-four, the first three numbers in each case adding up to eleven; the last two remaining each time the same, 12, 1."

Vincey smiled. "I wondered if you would tumble to it. It was lucky I won that last throw or I should have been fifteen louis out of pocket. Heavy postage!"

"Hullo!" George exclaimed suddenly, "there is my cousin Mervyn Hartopp and his wife. I didn't know they were down here. If you don't mind I will just go and have a word with them."

When Fennix had left him, Vincey found a vacant chair at one of the tables at which he had not already played, and started gambling mildly for his own amusement.

After a few minutes, he began to have the feeling that someone was watching him, and he looked up. The

people gathered round the table were typical of the usual Monte Carlo gambling crowd. As it was the height of the season there were perhaps rather more really smart people than there are at other times; the flashy element was rather less prevalent than it is ordinarily: soiled cuffs and doubtful fingers adorned with suspicious brilliants were the exception rather than the rule: and there were many faces which would have stirred in a man of pleasure, such as Courtney for example, recollections of morning strolls down Piccadilly, the paddock at Newmarket or Longchamp; and of *cercles-privés* at Deauville or Biarritz, but otherwise there was nothing remarkable about them, and there did not seem to be anyone he knew personally. Opposite him an elderly Frenchman with a pointed grey beard and a monocle on a broad black ribbon, whom Vincey recognized from his pictures as the owner of the *Eclaireur de Paris* and the winner of last year's Gold Cup at Ascot, was losing heavily in a very bored way, much to the annoyance of a thickly painted middle-aged lady, the idol and despair of very young Paris, which had been flocking nightly for the past three months to see her act in *Coco cocu!* at the Gymnase, who seemed to have a financial interest in his fortunes; there was the antique rag-bag with beaky nose and superb diamonds (real ones) staking ten-franc chips as though they were *mille* and keeping a very sharp eye on her winnings, a familiar figure to frequenters of the Rooms; there was the English honeymoon couple feeling that they were seeing life; there was the inevitable South American being exploited by the inevitable demi-mondaine posing as a society woman travelling without her husband—a trick only a few years younger than that which consists in confiding spurious ten-pound notes to the innocent, while you slip round the corner to change their perfectly good fivers; there was a brick-red, clean-shaven Englishman, who might have been

any age between twenty-eight and sixty, looking as though he had just got out of a hot bath after a long run with the hounds; there were Americans with mouths like steel traps and Americans who looked as though the strict enforcement of prohibition would not do them any harm; there were Italians whom even the punctilio of the Rooms could not prevent from gesticulating; there were ruined Russians, whose eternal state of ruin never seems to prevent them gambling more deeply than the solvent; there were two Scandinavian women who looked like emancipated school-mistresses taking notes of southern depravity; and, Vincey noticed, as he encountered the gaze of a very tall, burly man standing behind the grey-bearded Frenchman, there was a Boche! And a Boche he knew; though he sincerely hoped he was a Boche who did not know him.

And that was exactly what Arndt was wondering.

Captain Tuff, his temporary companion, on his way from a table where he had won three hundred francs to the bar where he proposed to spend fifteen of them in liqueur brandy, had remarked casually, "Hullo, there is Vincey!" and gone on his way. Arndt, much as he approved of liqueur brandy as an interlude to gambling, had stopped.

Was it that sleek brown head which had butted him so violently in the stomach the previous night? Was it that carefully kept hand which had dealt out death to Sergei? Was that keen bronzed face, with its short fair moustache, the face behind the mask? The build was the same, the set of the shoulders . . . but the masked man had shot left-handed, and each time Vincey made a stake he did it with his right hand. And his right wrist seemed rather stiff, as though he had sprained it; what did that mean? Anything or nothing? Vincey's appearance was in a way familiar to him, but that was possibly because he had been

carefully described to him. Arndt did not know what to think.

Franz von Arndt was in a curious frame of mind that night. He was unsettled and dissatisfied, and his dissatisfaction was not relieved by the fact that he had lost nearly seven thousand francs since dinner; and seven thousand francs did not grow on every garden bush! He was unsettled for several reasons, the chief of which was that his present job did not suit him—it was too kid-gloved altogether—and he was dissatisfied with Jakobsen's way of running it, which did not give any opportunity for those pickings which he considered his due. Also, in his opinion, Jakobsen was not the man he had been. This job had been badly mismanaged; far too many things had gone wrong; it began to look as though his chief had lost his nerve, and Franz von Arndt had no use for nerveless leaders. The trouble was that he depended on Jakobsen. Without Jakobsen, he was nobody—less than nobody, or rather worse; a person whom it was in the interest of a great number of people to destroy. He knew too much. He had made too many enemies. He was a professed doer of dirty jobs, and the fate of such a man when the star of his master is on the decline is not an enviable one. Arndt knew as well as anyone that the future of Jakobsen depended on the success of the S.I.B.V. If that succeeded, he would become one of the half-dozen most powerful men in Russia; if it failed, he would not be worth the price of a dead dog—and he, Arndt, knew what that would mean to him. Headquarters in Moscow knew that he cared about as much for the Revolution as for the cause of Prohibition; he was only tolerated because he was known as Jakobsen's man; his swashbuckling in Central Asia, his year of kingship, had been the apex of his career, but the glorious gory days which had made that possible seemed to have passed never to return, and

there remained nothing but a black mark against his name for that exploit, and in Soviet Russia black marks are blotted out in red.

Jakobsen was as touchy as he could be, and that in itself was a bad sign. He had had a private talk with him at Lady Hetty's before dinner, but he had been unable to make any headway. He had wanted him to make the theft of Rakoff's papers an excuse to kick that intruder out, to show Moscow a bold front, to tell headquarters that he would run things on his own lines or not at all, and then to allow him, Arndt, to instil a little life into them. He would soon settle Fennix's hash and Vincey's too, if he had anything to do with the Society of Nobles—and he would take very good care (though he did not tell Jakobsen this) that his work was paid for at what he considered a suitable rate. When Jakobsen had finally consented to listen to him, he had done so, with obvious reluctance, and had only condescended to growl as he got into the car to be driven home, "No, Franz, you do not understand. Things are not so simple as all that." Not so simple! He would simplify matters all right if he was given a chance. But the truth was Louis Jakobsen had lost grip; he was not the man he used to be. He had hinted as much to Lady Hetty, but she had never known Jakobsen in the old days, and he had not been able to bring her to his own pitch of righteous indignation at the way things were going and at the gross breach of professional etiquette involved in Jakobsen's closeness over the money side of the business. Hetty was a free lance. What her particular graft with Moscow was, he did not know; but she did not depend on Jakobsen, and it was all one to her whether the S.I.B.V. succeeded or failed so long as she got some amusement out of the adventure and scope for her own peculiar talents. But with him it was very different. If the S.I.B.V. failed he was done

for . . . done for, without even having had a run for his money.

There was, of course, the other side . . . as a last resort, there was always the other side! If Jakobsen had not been so close over the dollars, such a thought would never have entered his head. When he considered what had happened to certain others who had played a double game, he rather wished it had not; but a man must live, and living meant living well—he would as soon be dead as exist on a pittance. If he could not kick some life into the S.I.B.V. within the next week or two, he would cut the painter and let it and Jakobsen go to glory. The *coup* Jakobsen had planned was an audacious one worthy of the old days, but he mistrusted its method of execution. Still, if it succeeded . . . but he was not going to be dragged down with Jakobsen just because Jakobsen had lost his nerve—not he!

When Arndt had finally decided that he could not make up his mind one way or the other about Vincey, he moved towards the doors leading into the atrium with the intention of joining Captain Tuff, still presumably occupied with his liquid interlude. To his surprise, however, Bertie Tuff, usually solitary and almost morose in his routine of dissipation, was a member of a large and animated group, the composition of which needs a certain amount of explaining.

The group consisted of Lady Harriet, the Baroness Lewel, Jakobsen, Winspear and Dr. Parker.

Lady Harriet, who had been prevented by a visit from coming to the Casino immediately after dinner with her husband and Arndt, who had been dining with them, had met Winspear in the foyer, when she had at last been able to descend from her meretricious eyrie in Beausoleil, and he had introduced Dr. Parker to her. While they were talking, Bertie Tuff, on the way back to the Rooms from

the Café de Paris opposite, where he was accustomed to spend the *entr'acte*, so to speak, had run into them, and, much to his annoyance, had been hailed by his wife. A minute or two later, while Lady Hetty, very gay, vivacious and amusing in a daring sort of way, as she always was on meeting for the first time any man under fifty, was captivating Dr. Parker, Jakobsen and the Baroness Lewel appeared from the vestibule. Wanda had been bored at home, Jakobsen explained, and had suggested that they should come into Monte Carlo and see a little life. On hearing this, Dr. Parker conferred for a moment with Winspear, who announced that though Dr. Parker was naturally shy about inviting his new acquaintances he yet hoped that they would waive ceremony and join his birthday party. Wanda accepted gravely and graciously, Lady Hetty with shrill screams and an aside to Dr. Parker which made that worthy wonder whether he was standing on his head or his heels.

And then they were joined by Arndt, who, of course, was also invited to join the party.

While Dr. Parker went across to the Hotel de Paris to confer with the head waiter, and the others broke up into two small groups, Wanda slipped away into the Rooms. In the course of conversation Winspear had mentioned that Vincey was there.

CHAPTER XII

THE ENCOUNTER ON THE TERRACE

TO Vincey that evening was a nightmare from which he did not free himself for many a long day, a nightmare in which he seemed to be the helpless victim of desperately improbable combinations of chance.

It is horribly ungallant to compare the most beautiful woman on the Côte d'Azur to a bird of ill omen, and yet that is how Wanda appeared to him when he saw her with a half-smile on her lips on the other side of the green table.

He pocketed his *jetons* or chips—in these degenerate days people no longer play with money at Monte Carlo—rose and joined her.

"What are you doing here?" he asked, uncomfortably, as they made their way to a seat.

Wanda gave a happy little sigh. "I thought it was a bad fairy which made me depressed to-night, so depressed that I asked Louis to take me to Monte Carlo, but it was a good fairy after all. What a good fairy!"

"Is Jakobsen here?" Vincey asked.

Wanda shrugged her shoulders impatiently. "Yes; but never mind him. We must talk and plan while we have the opportunity. Did you get my letter?"

Vincey began to explain how wildly imprudent it had been of her to write: she ought never to write unless she had something of vital importance to say. It was not a very happy opening. Wanda listened to him in silence, with darkening brows. Vincey stuttered on. He had explained the previous night in their talk at Lady Har-

riety's that Jakobsen must have no suspicion that he was working counter to him in the matter of the S.I.B.V. Did not Wanda remember? Did not she remember how she had promised to help him by trying to find out what Jakobsen's plans were, and how he had told her that whatever happened Jakobsen must not suspect that they were anything more than the most casual acquaintances!

"Ah, yes, the S.I.B.V.," she said slowly. "I had forgotten."

Vincey talked and Wanda was darkly silent . . . impenetrable. Of what was she thinking? Was she listening to what he was saying or were her thoughts a hundred miles away? It was like talking to someone in a pitch-dark room, someone who never answers . . . till at last we begin to wonder if they are really there, or if we are discharging words into emptiness.

"Your promptness in switching out the light saved my life last night," Vincey said, and he asked her how she had known he was behind the curtain.

"I felt it, of course," Wanda replied as if the answer was so obvious that the question was not worth asking.

Vincey floundered on. Until the S.I.B.V. was smashed . . . he was not his own master, he was tied by his duty, by pledges. . . . They must be frightfully careful; even to talk like this was an imprudence. She said nothing; and he started again, rather breathlessly. He felt like a swimmer battling with a strong current, swimming, swimming, swimming and yet never getting any further. Had anything happened during the day? Had she anything to tell him? Did she think that Jakobsen suspected him?

Wanda did not answer, but asked suddenly in a voice that was slightly puzzled:

"Why do you not make love to me?"

Vincey muttered something about it being dangerous for them to be seen talking together at all.

"I mean, why do you not make love to me in your mind? Your mind is not loving me."

"All this crowd of people . . . they're so disturbing . . . atmosphere so unsympathetic." Vincey was so worried, he hardly knew what he was saying.

"If you do not like the people, then let us go out on the terrace," said Wanda, rising.

"Won't you catch cold?" he said desperately. "It will be bitterly cold out there. A night in early February is very different from an April evening, you know."

Wanda did not deign to answer, and Vincey followed her miserably to the vestibule. He hated himself for the mean part he was playing and he almost hated Wanda. Why could not she leave him alone? At any other time, there would have been something rather touching in her unconventionality and in her refusal to admit the possibility of his not loving her; but now . . . Why could not she behave like a sane, civilized woman, instead of like a heroine in a Russian novel? This sort of thing would ruin him unless he stopped it at once—and how was he to do that? If he told her straight out that he was in love with someone else and did not care a button about her, except in so far as she could help him to smash the S.I.B.V., there would be hell to pay. "A woman scorned." . . . She was the passionate, glowering, half-savage type; she would suffer tortures gladly for a man she loved, but if she suspected for a minute that she had been duped she would be relentless in revenge. Vincey did not want to dupe her; he wanted nothing so much as to play fair; but love and hate are akin, and if she turned on him . . .

"If you do not mind, I will just get my coat and hat."

Wanda tapped the floor petulantly with her foot. "Hurry up, then."

They passed in silence through the gardens and round the end of the Casino to the terrace overlooking the *Tir*

aux pigeons. With the exception of a man sitting dejectedly on a bench with his head in his hands and a tall slim figure at the other end of the terrace leaning on the balustrade and gazing at the lights of Monaco across the harbour, the place was deserted. Wanda put her arm through Vincey's and hurried him along until they came to a secluded bench. At the sound of their steps the tall, slim figure, who Vincey could now see was a woman wrapped in a long fur coat which reached to her ankles, glanced towards them.

"Boris, my Boris!" Wanda's arms were about him, and her lips had found his. She had opened her coat and he could feel the warmth and the shape of her breasts through her thin dress as she pressed herself against him. She sat on his knees and twined herself about him.

"Wanda" . . . Vincey gasped, half-strangled by her furious embrace. "Wanda, for God's sake . . ."

"No, no," she cried fiercely. "I must love you. Let me love you."

"Wanda! For heaven's sake, remember yourself. That woman over there can see us. She is looking at us."

"What do I care? Do you think I am going to let you go now that I have got you? I have been dreaming of this all these years. Are you a man? Am I not beautiful enough for you? Can't you feel me in your arms? Can't you feel me against you, my breasts, my body? I do not care if a hundred people can see.

"Take me, Boris: take me! Love me till I swoon. Let me die of love in your arms. Ah!"

With an effort, Vincey extricated himself from her embrace and stood up. Wanda sat crouched on the bench.

"Be angry," she crooned. "Beat me. Beat me till I scream and then love me. . . ."

"Will you hold your tongue?" Vincey muttered fiercely between his teeth. The fur-coated woman was walking

slowly past them. She gave a half-disdainful glance in their direction, and Vincey's eyes met hers. He had moved from the shadow encircling the bench and was standing in the full light of a lamp.

The woman was Avril de Cheverney.

Avril walked straight on, through the gardens to where her car was waiting for her. Oh, yes, she had seen all right, but she was stunned, numbed with pain. So this was the end of her romantic excursion. She lay back in the darkness of the swiftly-moving car and pressed her fingers to her temples. The princess came forth to surprise her humble lover, to give him the meeting in the garden he dared not ask, and found him on a bench in the arms of a woman of the town. How dirty life was! How hideously foul and impure!

Avril felt almost sick with pain. It was as though she had been struck a violent blow over the heart. And the irony of it!

It was after dinner, when she had gone to her room to be alone and think, that the idea had come to her. She began to ache for Vincey, just for the sight of him. She did not want to join his party, but she just wanted to be able to see him, perhaps to have one word with him, and then to return comforted, warmed. . . . What an innocent adventure, and yet how exciting! How surprised he would be when he saw her coming towards him in the Rooms. He would look up from playing and see her on the other side of the table watching him. She could see the smile breaking on his lips, his quick lithe movement as he turned to make his way out of the crowd so that he could come to her. And perhaps, who knew? he would ask her to stroll for a moment in the gardens, and would say what she felt had been on his lips that afternoon. If they were already supping at the Hotel de Paris, she was going to have looked up an old friend who was stay-

ing there and asked her to supper in the restaurant. She had pictured Vincey's face as he saw her come in, the smile she would exchange with him, the smile which would make his heart beat a little faster, the looks he would steal from time to time at her table. . . . When she had reached Monte Carlo, the clear beauty of the night had tempted her to wander for a few minutes on the terrace before entering the Casino. Her nerves had been tingling with a pleasurable sense of adventure. How beautiful life was! A fairy land. And then it had been spoilt by two common people hugging and kissing and struggling on a bench. . . . And one of them was Vincey, the man she loved, the man she had come to see for one moment to refresh her dreams! God, how horrible! How indescribably beastly!

"What on earth is the matter, Avril? Are you ill?"

Hilda had been drawn to the hall by the sound of the car. Colette was standing in the doorway of the morning-room.

Avril tried to smile.

"Mrs. Pendragon was not in, so I came straight back."

"But you are looking ill," Hilda pursued. "Are you feeling ill?"

"I am tired and I have got a headache. I shall go to bed. Good night. No, thanks, dear, I don't want anything or anyone; just bed."

Had Vincey recognized her, she wondered when she was alone? Quite possibly not: she had been muffled in furs to the eyes, and Monte Carlo was the last place that he would expect to see her. She would know in the morning. If he had recognized her, he would of course resign his position at once. He could not stay in her employment after that. But if he had not recognized her, what was she to do? She could not dismiss him. There was no excuse; and he must never suspect that she had

seen what she had seen. The morrow would provide. There were always ways and means of making him see that his presence was unwelcome.

Could she believe the evidence of her own eyes? From all that she knew of Vincey, from all that experience had taught her, from the atmosphere that surrounded the man, his manner, his innate breeding, his fineness of temper, the thing was unbelievable—and yet she had seen, seen with her own eyes. There could be no mistake. She had seen him from within a few yards with the light full on him. Surely it could not be that she had been thinking about him to such an extent that a total stranger had taken on his form. No, that was too far-fetched. He was just . . . he was just . . . What did it matter what he was? Her dream was over . . . finished, and never, never, never again would she indulge in dreams. The future? The future would be like the past . . . before Vincey came into her life. But as she assured herself of this, she knew very well that it would not be so. It would be long, long before the wound healed, and there would be an ineffaceable scar, for she had loved him. . . . Oh, how she had loved him!

Avril sobbed as though her heart would break.

"Qui est là?"

The door opened gently. *"C'est moi, Colette."*
"Qu'est-ce que tu veux?"

Colette closed the door and rustled towards the bed. "I knew it," she said slowly, "I knew it. My little Avril, you have been hurt. I saw at once when you got out of the car. Poor little Avril! Don't tell me anything unless you want to: I don't want to know: only I could not bear to think of you up here all alone crying your pretty eyes out." Colette perched herself on the bed and put her arms round Avril's neck. "My dear, I know what it is to be hurt too. I am a bad woman, but I know what love

means, real love. You poor child, you poor child. . . ."

An hour later Colette tip-toed out of the room. Thanks to two cachets which, wise in emotional crises, she had brought with her, Avril was sleeping; and she knew the story of Vincey's perfidy. But though she knew the story, she did not know what to make of it.

CHAPTER XIII

A LITTLE SUPPER AND A GAME OF POKER

"MY God! Did you see who that was!" Vincey gasped, as Avril passed them like a ghost and disappeared into the shadows at the end of the terrace.

"What does it matter who it was? Come to me, my lover." Wanda rose from the bench and came towards him.

Vincey turned on her fiercely. "If you touch me again, I will kill you," he blazed. He put his clenched fists to his head and then flung his arms wide. "My God, my God, what have I done to be tormented like this?"

Wanda stopped short in amazement. Vincey's face was transfigured with a mixture of pain and fury such as she had never seen on a human face before. She knew that he meant what he said, and that if she so much as touched his sleeve he would be capable of killing her where she stood.

"What is it, Boris? What have I done?" Wanda spoke brokenly in a whisper. She shrank before his anger as before a devouring flame. Her passion wilted before his. She felt her knees trembling so that she could hardly stand. He raised his clenched fists to heaven and cursed the day he had set eyes on her. Gone was the cosmopolitan gentleman with an English education: remained the Russian prince, whose Tartar ancestors had been tyrants for seven centuries with *droits de seigneur* over thirty thousand souls.

And then his anger died down as quickly as it had

flamed. "After all, how could you know?" he muttered. "How could you know? It is not your fault; you could not know."

Wanda watched him cross the terrace and lean on the balustrade. Chin in hand, he gazed out to sea. After a moment's hesitation, she followed him.

"Boris," she said in a low voice, very humbly, "what is it? What have I done?"

"Never mind; it is over now, finished. I am sorry I spoke harshly to you."

Wanda touched his arm timidly with her hand. She had no fear now. His voice was broken, lifeless.

"I am sorry, Boris."

"Let us go."

"Boris, tell me before we go . . ."

The flame leapt in Vincey's eyes, but his voice was controlled and firm, as he answered: "Never speak to me of this night as long as you live. It is dead; as dead as the hopes that were in my heart. Now let us go."

They had not walked more than a few paces before they saw a figure coming towards them. It was Captain Tuff, who had been sent by his wife to look for them.

"They've gone over to the Hotel de Paris for supper," he said sulkily. "Hetty told me to come and find you: she thought she saw you going out of the Casino a few minutes ago."

It came to Vincey as a shock that it was only a few minutes ago since they had left the Casino. It seemed a lifetime.

"I asked Mr. Vincey to take me out to get a little air," Wanda said with composure. "The heat of the Rooms gave me a headache, which I am afraid is very little better now. I think on the whole I had better go home. I hardly feel up to supping with all you gay people. Will

you see about my car, Mr. Vincey; and perhaps Captain Tuff would tell my brother, when we get to the Hotel de Paris, that I should like to speak to him a moment? I would rather not go into the restaurant."

When Vincey had executed his commission, he entered the Hotel de Paris to find Wanda and Jakobsen in the hall.

"No, Louis," she was saying, "there is really no need for you to come back with me. It is only the headache which I have felt hovering about all day. You stay here and enjoy yourself. I will send the car back for you. By the way, thank you so much for finding it for me, Mr. Vincey. Good night. Good night, Louis: enjoy yourself."

Vincey and Jakobsen saw her into the car, and then turned back into the hotel.

"Are you going to wash your hands? Then I'll wait for you and show you where our table is," Jakobsen said with his eternal smile, as Vincey divested himself of his hat and coat.

"I have not yet met our host," the latter remarked abruptly, as they entered the restaurant a minute or two later.

"Haven't you?" Jakobsen replied in his chirpy voice. "He has just been telling us a most remarkable experience that he had last night. Unfortunately, I missed the end of it, as Captain Tuff came in to tell me that Wanda wanted to speak to me."

Even without Jakobsen's pilotage, Vincey would have had little difficulty in finding their table as Lady Harriet's shrill laugh, which, George Fennix declared, was an echo of the love-cry of the first bar-maid, rose high above the subdued murmur of conversation which filled the room.

As they approached, Dr. Parker rose from his chair; and Vincey's heart gave a bound and then seemed to stand still.

Out of the corner of his eye, he could see Arndt, who seemed to be watching the meeting with an interest entirely disproportionate to its supposed importance.

The shock of this unexpected encounter brought Vincey to himself. The scene on the terrace had left him giddy and mazed; he had been speaking and acting like an automaton; but the sudden swift sense of danger which assailed him on seeing his casual ally of the previous night braced him and helped him to collect his scattered wits. Luckily Jakobsen had threaded his way through the tables ahead of him, so that, while the financier made way for him, he had a second or two in which to recover from his surprise and dismay.

He had paid but scant attention to the very little he had heard of the distant connection of the Winspears', who had included him at Courtney's suggestion in the invitation to his supper party, and it had never occurred to him for a moment that his host might be the very man whose car he had boarded so unceremoniously only twenty hours before.

"Mr. Vincey, I believe. Very pleased to meet you, Mr. Vincey. Won't you take . . ."

Vincey had gone suddenly white with pain, and his left hand clasped his right wrist. It was the one which had been grazed by Jakobsen's bullet, and Dr. Parker's handshake lacked nothing in heartiness.

Parker's eyes dropped from Vincey's face, which, thanks to the mask he had worn on their previous meeting, he had never seen, down to his hands. A fringe of white bandage was visible beneath his shirt-cuff which his sudden gesture had shot back. A quick look of surprise flashed across Parker's face, and Vincey, in spite of his

pain, could see reflected in the glance he gave him the dawn of suspicion that was breaking on his mind.

"It is all right. I ought to have warned you. I strained my wrist cranking up a car this morning, and it is not in very good form yet."

Dr. Parker was profuse in apologies, found him a seat next to Lady Harriet, introduced him to Herr von Arndt, his neighbour on the other side, and saw that he was supplied with caviare and a cocktail. Opposite him there was a vacant place, and it suddenly occurred to Vincey that Fennix was missing. The same thought must have struck Lady Harriet, for she nudged him familiarly and said:

"What have you done with old George Fennix, Vincey?"

"I have not done anything with him," he replied in the same sociable tone; "the last time I saw him, he was pursuing some friends he had unexpectedly caught sight of in the Casino. I suppose he has tacked on to them."

Vincey was pleased to hear himself speaking so naturally. When he had first caught sight of Dr. Parker, he had thought for one ghastly moment that he was going to lose his nerve.

"I believe he mentioned their name, though I cannot remember what it was. I think he said they were cousins."

When Vincey looked up, he found Dr. Parker's eye fixed on him, and it struck him that speaking naturally had its disadvantages. Why, oh! why, had he not pretended that he did not speak English the previous night, or rather early that morning?

"Well, Dr. Parker," Jakobsen broke in almost impatiently, "when I was called away just now you were about to tell us of your adventure last night, or rather what happened after this bloodthirsty ruffian burst from my gates pursued by my Armenian servant, who, I must ad-

mit, is a pretty wild-looking fellow himself. You say he jumped on the footboard of your car. What happened then?"

"Dr. Parker helped him to evade the law," said Arndt with a laugh that rang a trifle false.

"Well," said Parker in a rather embarrassed voice, "I guess there was not much choice. I was hardly in a position to argue with a man armed with a forty-five Colt, though if I had known that he had been after your spoons, I guess I would have tried to get rid of him somewhere where he would have been caught good and quick."

"Where did you drop him?" Jakobsen asked, bending forward eagerly.

Dr. Parker looked round the table, until his eyes rested on Vincey.

"Where did I drop him?" he repeated slowly. "Why, I dropped him on the main road not far from the Faisan Doré."

Vincey, with an inaudible sigh of relief at the untruthful answer, turned to Herr von Arndt.

"Do tell me the beginning of this extraordinary story," he said confidentially. "Do I understand that you had a burglary last night?"

"If you can call it a burglary when the burglar gets away with nothing but a useless list of names and addresses," Arndt replied with a quick look.

"When you dropped this chap," Winspear said, "why did you not knock up the people at the Faisan Doré and telephone to the nearest police station?"

"Firstly," returned Dr. Parker, "I do not speak a word of the language, and as far as I know I am not enough of an adept at sign-language to get a long story like that across. I guess I should have been fired out before I had got very far. Secondly, I am here on a holiday, and

don't want to spend my time reconstructing crimes with the French police. My work in San Francisco brings me quite often enough in touch with cops, and the less I see of them the better I shall be pleased while I am over here. Thirdly, I was not quite sure whether my man was not as much sinned against as sinning. Your Armenian servant looked as if he meant pretty serious business last night, Mr. Jakobsen," he concluded coolly.

"Yes," Jakobsen smiled, "he is a savage-looking fellow, but very useful. I really keep him as a sort of watch-dog. It would be a bad business for us financiers if we had to rely entirely on the protection of the police."

"As you don't understand French, I suppose the man must have spoken to you in English," Lady Harriet remarked.

"Well, Lady Tuff," Parker replied cryptically, "it was not American."

"But was it good English?" Vincey hastened to forestall the question that was hovering on at least two pair of lips. "Did he speak with a pronounced accent, for example?"

"Well, no: I can't say he did," Dr. Parker returned with a quick glance across the table. "I should say he spoke very much the way you do, Mr. Vincey."

Parker's answer showed Vincey where he stood. He must not expect much assistance from his host. He had lied about the place where he dropped him that morning, probably because aid to that extent had been implied in the offer he had made to drop him "within a hundred yards of his front door and not to watch which way he went," but beyond that he did not feel himself committed: and Vincey did not feel that he could wholly blame him. Parker had behaved like a sportsman the night before when the situation had been actively critical, but there was

no more reason why he should help a supposed criminal to cover up his tracks afterwards than there was why he should not make social capital out of a very good story.

"Perhaps it *was* Vincey," Jakobsen said with his quiet smile. "Or can you prove that you were in bed and asleep at two o'clock or thereabouts this morning?" he added with a bland glance in Vincey's direction.

"He can't do that, by gad," Winspear remarked innocently, "for he did not get in till four o'clock in the morning."

"It seems to me you will have to prove an alibi, Mr. Vincey," said Arndt with a boisterous laugh and a swift sidelong glance at Jakobsen.

"Where were you last night after you left us, Vincey?" Lady Harriet asked in a voice that for her was almost gentle. Vincey had a feeling that she hoped he would be able to give a satisfactory explanation of his movements.

Vincey drained his glass of champagne and put it down before he answered.

"As a matter of fact," he said coolly, looking at Dr. Parker, "at two o'clock this morning, I cannot have been so very far from the Faisan Doré."

As he calmly continued his supper, he could feel intuitively the varying degrees of interest aroused by this admission.

"What on earth were you doing there?" It was Winspear speaking. He had already heard Vincey's story of his friend in Menton and the broken down car, but he had a lazy habit of immediately forgetting everything which did not affect him personally.

"Come on, Vincey, we shall really begin to think you were chasing around in Louis Jakobsen's garden, dressed up in a mask, unless you explain what you were doing at that time on the way to Cap Martin," Lady Harriet said in a slightly exasperated voice.

"Don't you mind them, Mr. Vincey," Arndt exhorted him in his turn with diplomatic jocularly. "Between midnight and dawn, bachelors' movements are their own affair and no one else's. Don't you pay any attention to them."

"Oh, bosh!" Lady Hetty exclaimed with asperity. "Love-birds do not nest in the trees round Cap Martin."

"Before I reply to this preliminary interrogation," Vincey said, smiling good-humouredly, "I must apologize to you, dear Lady Harriet, for leaving your party without thanking you and saying good-bye. My bad manners were not intentional, and there was an excuse for them as you will see. While I was enjoying your hospitality, I suddenly remembered that I had promised to go and see that very evening a Swiss banker by name Fugger, who is staying at the Hotel de Londres. If you take the trouble to look over your shoulder, you will see him supping three tables away with a dark young man, whom I should judge to be an Italian. A square-faced man, with iron grey hair brushed straight back. You see him? Well, he had promised to advise me about a little speculation which is far too trivial to mention in Mr. Jakobsen's presence, and I was anxious not to miss the appointment. Yes, please, I should like a little more. This *pâté* is excellent."

While Vincey was being helped, his mind was working like lightning. If he could spin a good yarn, there was just a chance that they might be satisfied. He thought it pretty safe to admit a non-existent visit to Fugger, as that worthy had only recently arrived in Monte Carlo, and the probabilities were strongly in favour of their never having heard of him, anyhow as anything but a banker, which was actually his profession. When the waiter had moved away, Vincey continued conversationally. "As I did not think it likely that my business with

Fugger would take more than a few minutes, which it did not . . .”

“You actually saw him, did you?” Arndt interrupted quickly.

Vincey raised his eyebrows slightly. “Certainly. If you doubt it, you have only got to go and ask him, or the concierge at the Hotel de Londres, who will tell you what the exact time was when he took up my card.”

Vincey was bluffing for all he was worth. It was his only chance.

“My dear sir, my dear sir,” Arndt expostulated with genial deprecation. “As if I should dream of such a thing. One might almost think you believe we really suspect you.”

Vincey smiled a trifle grimly. “It must be rather exciting to be a real criminal and to have to manufacture an alibi on the spur of the moment,” he remarked. “Well, as I was saying, knowing that my business with Fugger would only take a short time, I slipped out of the house without bidding my hostess farewell as I had every intention of returning before half an hour was up. On descending to the hall of the hotel, however, after spending ten minutes or a quarter of an hour with Herr Fugger in his sitting-room, I encountered a very old friend of mine, Major Roche, an Anglo-Indian—I met him originally in the Nilghiri Hills, where I was unsuccessfully planting rubber a few years before the war—who turned out to be staying at the Hotel Astoria at Menton. I hope you do not find all these details very boring,” he said with a smile, glancing round the table.

“On the contrary,” Jakobsen replied in a voice that was free from the slightest suspicion of mockery, “we find them very interesting.”

“Roche had been dining with friends at the Hotel de Londres—I am sorry I cannot tell you their names, but

I do not think I ever heard them—and was returning to Menton in his car that very minute. He asked me to go back with him so that we could have a talk over old times. I explained the position in which I was situated and suggested that we should meet to-day. However, that turned out to be impossible as he was leaving for Rome this morning. After a struggle between my own inclination and the claims of ancient friendship, I succumbed to my friend's insistence and returned with him to Menton."

"You put that very nicely, Vincey," Lady Hetty remarked approvingly. "Where the devil's that waiter? All this jaw is making me thirsty."

While Lady Harriet's glass was being refilled, Dr. Parker turned courteously to Vincey. "I am sure you will excuse our interest in your movements last night, Mr. Vincey, when you remember that this man, whom I left on the main road between Monte Carlo and Menton, made probably for one town or the other, and that, according to what you said, you were in that neighbourhood just about the time he got out of my car. Mr. Jakobsen is naturally anxious to get any clue to the identity of the man who attempted to burgle his house, and, now that I have had the pleasure of making Mr. Jakobsen's acquaintance, I am anxious to repair my carelessness in letting him get away so easily."

Vincey bowed slightly. "I understand perfectly. I stayed talking very late with Major Roche at his hotel. We had not met for some years, and you know what it is like when you begin filling in gaps and tracing careers of bygone friends. I could not tell you exactly what the time was when I finally insisted on his seeing about his car, as he had promised to drive me home, but it must have been pretty late as the bar had shut."

This homely detail succeeded in rousing Captain Tuff, who had made Vincey's story, which did not interest him

in the least, an excuse to devote himself wholeheartedly to the liqueur brandy.

"Then rushed been after one o'clock," he remarked authoritatively.

"I thought you had gone to sleep, Bertie," his wife observed, regarding him suspiciously through her eyeglass.

Captain Tuff was so pleased with the attention he had attracted that he added, nodding his head solemnly: "Shtoria bar closes one o'clock. Barman's name's George."

"Just put that carafe of *fine champagne* out of his reach, Winspear, will you?" Lady Harriet remarked calmly. "We may want him to play 'bac' or poker presently. Go on, Vincey, it was one o'clock and a fine frosty morning, and old man Roche was trying to find his car."

"Just as you say; but the trouble was that the car started coughing before we had gone very far and stopped dead a couple of kilometres out of Menton. We must have spent the best part of three-quarters of an hour trying to get the beastly thing to go: and finally I did succeed in getting a back-fire out of her which nearly dislocated my wrist."

Vincey could feel Dr. Parker's eyes on him. He had been following each point of Vincey's alibi with the care of a judge presiding at a trial. As Vincey mentioned his wrist, he nodded his head slightly. Vincey wondered if he were deceived. He feared it was very doubtful, as voices are the most tell-tale things on earth.

"Unfortunately that back-fire was nothing but pure spitefulness," he continued gloomily, "and there we were stuck nearly a couple of miles from Roche's hotel at something like two o'clock in the morning. . . ."

"Or possibly a bit before," Dr. Parker put in. "Trying to fix a broken-down car in the middle of the night always

seems to take much longer than it really does. I know from experience."

"Well, to shorten the story a bit," Vincey said, with a slight air of boredom, "we left the car where it was; Roche went back to Menton to try and get someone to put the thing right; and I walked on to Monte Carlo in the hope of getting some sort of conveyance to take me home."

"Would it not have been better to have gone back to Menton with your friend?" Arndt asked quickly. "He would naturally knock up a garage, and you could have got a car there to take you home."

"I did not think so then, and I have no reason to think so now," Vincey replied shortly. "I thought it extremely probable that I should find some belated motorist going in my direction, and, if not, there was always the probability of being able to find a car or a taxi knocking about in Monte Carlo, even at that hour."

"Mr. Vincey was quite right," Jakobsen said in a conciliatory voice. "I should have done the same thing in his place."

"Did you find anyone to give you a lift?" Lady Hetty asked, lighting a cigarette. She was inclined to believe Vincey's story and thought that Arndt and Jakobsen had hit a false trail.

Vincey shook his head.

"Not a soul the whole way," he replied; "Monte Carlo was like a city of the dead. The only motorist I met from the time the car broke down until I reached home, after wearing holes in the soles of my evening shoes, incidentally, was at the corner of the Boulevard de la Condamine. I had just reached the Rue Grimaldi, and he was coming along the Boulevard de la Condamine from the Monaco direction. Unfortunately, he turned up the hill to Monte Carlo, so he was no good to me."

"I wonder what time that was," Dr. Parker said thoughtfully.

"I'm sure I do not know. Yes, I do, though, by Jove! I remember the clock of the church just by there—what is its name? St. Devote, isn't it?—striking the three-quarters and thinking it must be a quarter to three; and it must have been, for it was about four o'clock when I got home."

There was a silence, only broken by Captain Tuff's thick whispers to Winspear to pass the liqueur brandy. Dr. Parker was puzzled. Either Vincey was genuine, in which case it was an extraordinary coincidence that he should have a damaged wrist and a voice so curiously like that of the man he had helped to escape, or else he was a wonderful hand at pitching a yarn. He had been very suspicious of Vincey at the start, but as his story progressed he had begun to wonder if it were not true after all, and the final detail about the quarter before three striking from the church clock as a car ran down the Boulevard de la Condamine in the direction of Monte Carlo very nearly persuaded him that he had been doing Vincey a terrible injustice; for his car had turned up the hill towards Monte Carlo, after dropping the masked man in Monaco, just as the church clock had struck: and the only person who could possibly know that would be someone who was actually there. He had not seen anyone about, but if Vincey had been a yard or two up the Rue Grimaldi, it would have been a hundred to one that he would not see him. It looked very much as if Vincey was genuine . . . and yet . . . The voice was the same, the build, and there was the wrist. If only he could get a closer look at that wrist! Dr. Parker had seen quite enough of Vincey's pursuers to be glad that he had helped him to escape. He had not cottoned to Jakobsen's bodyguard at all, and he had

the average man's distaste for financiers, except on the rare occasions when they could be persuaded to give reliable tips; but Jakobsen, as far as he was concerned, had ceased to be the aggrieved party in Vincey's (if it was Vincey's) escapade. The aggrieved party was his distant connection, the Duchesse de Cheverney: it was unlikely, to say the least of it, that she countenanced burglary under arms by her son's tutor; and he felt that, if he had really helped the said tutor to escape, it was his duty to bring him to justice before Mme. de Cheverney.

Vincey's shot about the clock, which had so unsettled Dr. Parker, had been a veritable inspiration. It so happened that he had noticed that it was about two minutes to the quarter when he entered the shabby drawing-room of their quarters after Parker had dropped him; a comparatively short but at the same time discreet distance from the house. Parker would take about three minutes to the bottom of the Avenue de Monte Carlo; the clocks therefore would be striking the quarter about the time he reached the place Vincey had named, and the chances were that Parker would remember that fact without remembering anything more precise than that he must have been just about where Vincey said at that time. It was a skilful invention and it had done much to dissipate the cloud of suspicion under which he rested—as far as Dr. Parker was concerned.

"And you saw no one on the road between Menton and Monte Carlo who might have been our man?" Jakobsen asked politely.

"Not a soul," he replied, pinching and lighting the Corona which Dr. Parker had given him.

With a muttered excuse, Arndt rose from the table and made his way out into the hall.

Of one accord, both Jakobsen and Dr. Parker began

to make themselves as pleasant as they possibly could to Vincey, and he wondered whether amiability was a tacit apology for their suspicions or a trick to lull his.

But the thing which worried him most was the absence of George Fennix. What could have occurred? Had he really joined his friends and shirked Parker's party, or had something happened to him?

Jakobsen and Winspear discussed the foreign exchanges; Lady Hetty began to bait and badger her husband, who had reached a state of sodden sulks; and Dr. Parker seemed immersed in his own thoughts. Vincey glanced over his shoulder. Fugger and the Italian, Mario Torricelli, a shining ornament of Fascimo and a dashing adherent to the Society of Nobles, were still sitting at their table and had been joined by a third man. Who could that be? Vincey could not see. . . . There, he was bending forward. . . . Good Lord, it was the Doctor!

Had Mr. Vincey ever been in the United States? Vincey gave half his mind to Dr. Parker, while the other half was wondering what on earth the Doctor, who had left the work of communicating with their Monte Carlo friends to him, was doing at the Hotel de Paris in the company of Fugger and Torricelli, with whom he avoided being seen whenever possible. It must be something pretty important to bring him over from Nice, something which must have occurred since he had seen him that morning. Yes, he had been a couple of times in New York, but not recently. Horace P. Loman? No, he had met him at Biarritz, the year after the war. And he had been once in Florida . . . Miami . . . Key West . . . he had been going from the Bahamas to Cuba. Dr. Parker knew Nassau, but he had not been in the Bahamas since they had become identified with bootlegging. What did Mr. Vincey think of Prohibition? Vincey imagined it

had come to stay; what did Dr. Parker think? Now what was Arndt doing all this time? Vincey had not heard what excuse he had made when he left them, but he had taken it for granted that he would only be gone a minute or two. This prolonged absence was rather disquieting. Yes, of course, Canada and the Mexican border were just as bad . . . it was bad luck on the Bahamas to get such a large share of the blame. . . . Ah, there was Arndt picking his way delicately between the tables. He was smiling. What a writhing false smile it was . . . his eyes were like stones.

What about a quiet game of poker? They did not want to fight round the tables in the Rooms: Lady Harriet's flat up in Beausoleil was much more comfortable than the Casino; the suggestion was Arndt's; Lady Hetty was agreeable; Winspear was game for anything, and so was Dr. Parker; Jakobsen thought it a good idea, and Captain Tuff signified his acquiescence by a nod; it was safer than speech. Vincey did not dare make an excuse to slip away; if he had succeeded in quieting their suspicions, such a step would immediately revive them; besides what could happen with Winspear and Parker there?

As they filed out of the room, Vincey remarked over his shoulder to Winspear: "We had better leave a message saying we have gone to Lady Harriet's in case Fennix turns up here after all."

As he said it in a deliberate voice, they were just abreast of Herr Fugger's table. The Doctor's eyes rested for a moment on Vincey, but there was not a trace of recognition in them. What could have brought him to Monte Carlo all in a hurry like this, Vincey wondered. He need not, after all, have gone to the trouble of communicating the date and time of the *coup* by cipher: the first three numbers added together giving the date, the 11th, and the remaining two the hour as nearly as it had been pos-

sible to arrange it in advance, 12, 1, between twelve and one. What could it be? Perhaps it was something of vital importance, and they were dying to get a word with him?

Winspear's car was waiting outside the Hotel de Paris; also the yellow and black Renault; it had been sent back from Cap Martin by Wanda.

As Vincey squeezed into the back of the Hispano-Suiza with Dr. Parker and Captain Tuff, he felt slightly reassured by the uncompromising angles of the pistol in his hip-pocket. But with Winspear and Dr. Parker there, what could happen?

Poker is a game which is best played by five, but which can be played by six. The party in Lady Harriet's flat numbered seven.

After a certain amount of discussion between Lady Harriet and Arndt, who seemed to be regarded as an authority on all games and contests which take place over the green baize, it was decided to play six and to cut out in turn. Lady Harriet, on the plea of seeing to sandwiches and drinks, insisted on being the first to stand out. The others sat down to play.

"Will you open the pot?" Winspear had dealt and was speaking.

"Yes, I'll open for a hundred francs." Jakobsen flicked a white chip into the middle of the table, and leisurely lit a cigar.

"Who's coming in?" Winspear cried. "Hullo, everybody is in! How many cards?"

"One for Jakobsen. Parker? None! Tuff? Three. Vincey? None! Two people standing: this looks like business, Arndt? Two. Dealer takes one. Opener's bet."

"Five hundred francs."

Parker had put his cards face downward on the table

and was leaning back in his chair. "I'll make it two thousand," he drawled.

Tuff held three sixes. He might be three parts drunk, but that was not drunk enough to induce him to bet when two people had taken no cards. He threw down his hand, muttering "Out."

Vincey glanced at his cards. "I'll see you and raise you a thousand."

Winspear had bettered and held a straight, but he was too old a player to back a good hand when there was certain to be a better one among the four players left in, two of whom had stood on their original draw. "I'm away," he announced.

"So am I." Jakobsen disclosed his openers, two small pairs, and tossed his cards into the "refuse" heap.

"Make it five thousand," Parker said quietly.

"Ten," Vincey returned.

Winspear surveyed the party with approval. "Come, come, this is not so bad for the first jackpot."

"Ten thousand five hundred," Arndt grunted.

"I'll make it fifteen," Parker murmured.

"Twenty," Vincey lit a cigarette.

"Thirty," Arndt said unexpectedly.

"Fifty," returned Parker calmly.

At that moment Lady Hetty came into the room. Jakobsen glanced over his shoulder. "Just listen to this," he said gaily. "Parker has made it fifty thousand francs to see. This is the nearest approach I've seen for ages to the way we used to gamble in the Argentine twenty years ago."

Lady Hetty hovered behind his chair.

"I will make it one hundred thousand francs to see," Vincey said coolly.

Arndt hesitated. He held four kings; but a hundred thousand francs was an appalling sum. He glanced at

Vincey's face . . . imperturbable, too imperturbable. Suddenly it was borne upon Arndt that Vincey was bluffing. Why else should he have raised the pool fifty thousand francs at one go? To frighten them out, of course. He was trying to bluff them with an ace high.

"I believe you are bluffing," he said at length rather thickly; "I will see you."

"You think that Vincey is bluffing do you?" Parker said, with a slight emphasis on "bluffing." "I wonder. At first, I thought he was; now I am not so sure. However, I am going on till I find out. It is a peculiarity of mine that I never allow myself to be bluffed, Mr. Vincey. May be silly obstinacy, but there it is. I will see and raise fifty thousand francs. That makes a hundred and fifty thousand to see."

"God's truth," said Tuff, sobered with excitement, "I am glad I am not in this."

"So am I," Lady Hetty returned shrewishly. "Your nerve is not what it used to be. Well, Vincey, if you lose this, you will have to make love to Avril to-morrow, and get her to advance you a few years' salary . . . unless you are on better terms than I imagine you are; then perhaps she will just call you a naughty boy."

Vincey flushed, but did not reply. Parker could not help glancing at Winspear to see how he would take Lady Harriet's deplorable observation. Winspear's face was inscrutable. He was rehearsing in his mind the terms in which he would repeat it to Avril on the morrow, with a fraternal lecture on the people she called her friends.

"As you say you suspect me of bluffing," Vincey remarked to Dr. Parker with a smile, "I am going to make you pay for your suspicion. I will raise you a hundred thousand francs. It is now a quarter of a million to see."

Winspear whistled. He had seen some heavy gambling in his time, but nothing like this. He would have begged

Vincey to go slow if it would have been of the slightest use; but when a man, whose salary is six hundred pounds a year, raises the pool to something like three thousand, he must either be stark staring mad or else hold an unbeatable hand. Dr. Parker seemed to think so too. He glanced at Vincey. There was a smile on his lips. "I wish I knew you better," he said, grinning. "A man's character shows up more clearly in his poker play than in anything on earth. Hell! Now, are you bluffing or aren't you? Is it a straight flush or a bust flush you've got in your hand? Gee, Vincey, you've got me guessing!"

Jakobsen rose from his chair and moved round to the other side of the table. Arndt packed his cards and handed them to him. After a glance Jakobsen gave them back.

"I'll back you, Franz, if you see him," Jakobsen said coolly.

"All right, I will see," Arndt scribbled the sum on a piece of paper and tossed it into the pool. There were not enough five thousand franc chips to make up the necessary amount.

"I will see you too," Parker said. "Have you got a straight flush? Because if not, I guess you are going to have a nasty shock." And he showed four aces.

Arndt flung down his four kings with a disgusted appeal to the deity.

Vincey dealt his hand on to the table: knave, ten, nine, eight, seven of hearts.

"God, it's a straight flush!" Winspear exclaimed excitedly.

Dr. Parker never moved a muscle. "You played that very well," he observed, turning to Vincey. "You made us all think you were bluffing, when you'd got the goods all the time. I wonder if that is a habit of yours."

Vincey did not answer. On looking up from his cards,

he had seen a peculiar meaning glance pass between Jakobsen and Arndt.

"Well, I guess any play will be tame after that," Winspear remarked. "A straight flush, four aces and four kings at the first deal, and over seven hundred and fifty thousand francs in the pool! you have cleared over half a million, Vincey."

Play was tame after that, comparatively speaking. After an hour or so, Lady Harriet agreed to cut in and suggested that Vincey, the heavy winner, was the most appropriate person to stand out. Parker could not quite see her argument and wondered why they did not cut to decide who was to stand out; but as Vincey made no objection and as Lady Harriet was his hostess, he did not like to suggest this more usual way of settling the question. Winspear said very half-heartedly that if nobody else wanted a respite, he was quite willing to give up his place, but there was no great warmth about his offer as he was just beginning to win after a bad run of luck. Captain Tuff whined pathetically: "Can't I have a drink, now, Hetty?" to which Lady Harriet replied, "You may have one, but it has got to last you an hour," and then added for the benefit of the company at large, "If I don't ration him, he does not last through the evening," for all the world as though her husband was some unstable edible. Said Jakobsen finally and with decision, "The only satisfactory way of doing things is to settle up with each man as his turn comes to stand out. If you like I will constitute myself banker. There is not enough ready money to pay more than about a third of your winnings, Vincey, if we put every penny we had towards it, which would prevent any possibility of settling up the smaller debts in cash at the end, and that would be a nuisance. I will give you cash for your counters and a cheque on my bank for the paper you have there, if that way of doing it suits you.

And then, if Dr. Parker and Franz will make the cheques out to me, we can destroy these unsatisfactory IOUs and start again on a cash basis. We are unlikely, I imagine, to run a huge pool like that first one again."

While Dr. Parker and Arndt were making out their cheques, Jakobsen counted Vincey out nine thousand five hundred francs in notes and then wrote him a cheque for five hundred and twenty-five thousand francs.

"It is lucky I have got the S.I.B.V. behind me," he smiled, as Vincey took it. "Going in with Franz on the last hand cost me a hundred and fifty thousand. You made us pay for our curiosity all right, Vincey; however, I daresay we shall get our revenge one of these days."

As Vincey put the notes and the cheque away in his pocket-book, he could not help wondering where the trick was! It could not be that Jakobsen's cheque was what is sometimes called a "stumer." It was too ridiculous to suppose that. As he made his way over to a table where there were drinks and cigars, he told himself reassuringly that honesty over playing debts was found among the most thorough-paced scoundrels now and again. He was pretty certain that though Jakobsen was capable of trying to smash civilization, he was quite incapable of cheating at cards.

A few minutes after they had restarted play, Lady Harriet said over her shoulder to Vincey: "I have left my bag in the music-room; you know, the Moorish room down the passage. Do be a dear boy and get it for me."

Vincey left the room to do her errand.

A moment later, the telephone bell rang. The telephone was in the hall. Lady Harriet jumped up. "Damn! I wonder who that is. All right, I'll see about it. I'm 'out': go on playing, don't pay any attention to me."

They went on playing and did not pay any attention to

her; but, in spite of this, when pooling their recollections of that evening long afterwards, Winspear and Dr. Parker both agreed over the next three things that happened, though they had disagreed over various other matters connected with that night, with which we have no present concern.

1. Lady Hetty's voice was heard speaking at the telephone, though no one heard what she said.

2. Lady Hetty, in the passage, but with her hand on the handle of the door, which she held a few inches open, was heard to say in a clear voice: "All right, Vincey, you go straight along. It is lucky you are a winner, he probably wants to borrow money from you. If you can drag him away bring him back here. Bye-bye."

Then she entered the room, closing the door; and the front door of the flat was heard to slam.

3. Dr. Parker and Winspear both thought they detected a faint odour of chloroform, and both assured themselves that it must be "imagination."

"Where has Vincey gone?" asked Tuff. "It is your deal, Arndt."

"George Fennix has just rung up from the Sporting Club. Wants to see Vincey about something. He sent many apologies to you, Dr. Parker, for not turning up at supper, but apparently he met some friends who would not let him go. I told Vincey to bring him back here."

"Three cards, please. If George has lost all his money, I wonder he did not ask for me," Winspear said. "I do not think Vincey carries much money on him as a rule."

"He did not say what it was he wanted to see him about. I only guessed it was money. It is what we usually want."

"How did he know we were here?" Winspear pursued, looking up from his cards.

"He rang up the Hotel de Paris, and they told him there. I left a message in case he should come on there late."

"So did Vincey, as a matter of fact. It is Tuff's bet."

Half an hour later, the telephone bell rang again, and Lady Harriet went to answer it.

When she returned, she was smiling.

"Old George Fennix and Vincey have rung up to say that you are not to wait for them, Winspear. They are going to find their own way back."

"Where are they and what are they doing?" Winspear asked rather crossly. He hated having his plans altered, even when it did not inconvenience him in the least.

"I don't know, and I did not dare ask," laughed Lady Harriet.

CHAPTER XIV

THE PAVILION IN THE GARDEN, AND WHAT HAPPENED THERE

WHEN Vincey came to, he found himself in a closed motor being driven at a fair speed along a road from which the sea was visible a couple of hundred metres or so away.

Coming-to is a time when things present themselves to our consciousness singly and unconnectedly; and isolated facts began to strike his mind as the first raindrops strike the unruffled surface of a pool.

The fall of the foreground and the distant curve of the bay, soft and yet clear in the moonlight, were familiar to him; he must be on the road between Monte Carlo and Cap Martin; the station of Roquebrune must be somewhere below on the right. And the car, in which he was lying rather than sitting in such an exceedingly uncomfortable position, was familiar too. It was the yellow and black Renault, in which Wanda always drove. Vincey wondered idiotically in his semi-conscious state if she had abducted him because he would not make love to her. The idea was so absurd that he wanted to laugh. But he could not; he could only make a silly-sounding croaking noise. There was something in his mouth. He realized now that ever since he saw the track of the moonlight across the sea he had been conscious of something very wrong with his face—it seemed all out of shape, or rather his mouth. . . . Good God! he was gagged. Instinctively, he tried to put his hand to his mouth . . . but his hands were handcuffed behind his back. This needed

serious consideration. What on earth had happened? They had been playing poker, he remembered that, and he had won a lot of money, and then Lady Harriet had asked him to get her bag from the music room, and he had gone along the passage, and the door of the room had been open, and there, on a little table by the piano, he had seen her bag; it was a grey suède one, rather worn, and he had wondered why she did not get a new one, he had seen such nice bags in a shop in the Boulevard des Moulins, and he had crossed the threshold of the room, and then . . . yes, it was coming back to him now . . . someone had jumped on him from behind, catching him by the throat and nearly strangling him, and then there had been another face . . . and a towel, and a sweet, heavy smell . . . foul . . . then, long afterwards, the track of the moonlight across the sea. Thank God, the window of the car was down: the night air helped his brain to work. Two of the bodyguard were in the car with him, one by his side, one opposite. They were leaning forward talking in low tones: they had not yet noticed that he had come to. Lord, how they smelt! If Wanda did not have to have the car disinfected to-morrow . . . Vincey tried to move his legs, but could not: he was trussed like a chicken. The fresh air was clearing his head fast. He saw the whole thing now. He had been caught like a tenderfoot. He thought he had quieted their suspicion . . . idiot that he was! He had thought that he would be safe simply because he was in the company of Winspear and Dr. Parker: he, Vincey, had thought that, with his knowledge of them! They had been simply playing him like a fish. When Arndt had left the table after dinner, he had smashed his alibi by telephoning to the Astoria at Menton; where he had probably discovered that though Major Roche had been staying there, and had left for Rome that morning, he had dined at the

hotel last night and had not gone out afterwards . . . something like that. The trouble was that Vincey had invented that alibi to satisfy the folk at the Villa Cheverney; it had not been intended for Cap Martin. He had met Roche the afternoon before Lady Harriet's evening party and Roche had told him that he was going to Rome the next morning; this item of information had stuck in his head and when he wanted a story to explain how it was that he had not got home till four in the morning, he had made use of it. Fool! the Doctor would never have made a mistake like that.

That crafty devil Arndt must have fixed the whole thing; telephoned to Cap Martin for two of the body-guard to go to Lady Harriet's; put Lady Harriet and Jakobsen wise in the car going up to Beausoleil—he remembered now how quickly they had bundled into the car and shot away, leaving Winspear to bring Tuff; while they were playing poker, Lady Harriet had let these ruffians in, and posted them in the music room with a towel and a bottle of chloroform. And he had walked straight into the trap. He had been caught before he could make a sound . . . and no doubt they had a plausible story for Winspear and Parker.

Well, it was all up with him now. He would not see to-morrow's sun rise, and he must make up his mind to it. It was rather a shock, of course . . . but was it? Suddenly, Vincey realized that as far as he was concerned he did not care, he really did not care. He hoped they would kill him not too unpleasantly . . . but that was all. So that must be the measure of his love for Avril . . . death was preferable to life without her, with this stain. . . . Funny inverted way of thinking, funny way of discovering how much he loved her. . . .

The car drew up. They had passed through the gates

of the villa, but had stopped short of the front door, about half-way up the drive.

Vincey was glad to see that his captors were two men whom he did not know by sight. If Yussuf, with the memory of last night's knock-out fresh in his mind, had been one of them, he might have fared hardly. As it was they treated him not too roughly. After loosening the cords round his legs so that he could hobble, one of them took him by the arm and led him past the end of the long, irregular house, in which not a light showed, and through a shrubbery which separated the upper lawn from the orchard, while the other poked him from time to time in the back with a Mauser pistol and warned him in very broken French not to attempt to escape. Vincey guessed they were taking him to Dr. Rakoff's pavilion; and he was right. There it was to the left, low, one-storied . . . sinister it looked in the moonlight. A chink of light showed where the curtains did not quite meet. Vincey hoped the interior would not be as stuffy as it had been on the previous night, when he had slipped over the sill to steal Rakoff's secret list. Last night! To think it was only last night: it seemed a century ago. God, how his mouth hurt! He hoped they would take the gag out before they killed him. Not that he had anything particular to say, but he would like to move his tongue and jaws naturally once more. . . .

They were on the verandah now, and the door was opening. There was Rakoff peering at them. He backed into the room with grotesque welcoming gestures and Vincey was pushed over the threshold.

With the exception of one addition the room was as he had seen it twenty-four hours before. The stove gave out an intolerable heat, the round table was still littered with books, papers covered the desk, test tubes and all the

paraphernalia of practical chemistry on three heavy tables filled the greater part of the room. . . . The one thing which was there now, but which had not been there the previous night, was a kitchen chair with George Fennix strapped to it.

Poor old George. His head wagged at Vincey and his eyes spoke volumes, but never a word did he utter. And Vincey wagged back as well as he could, while they strapped him in another kitchen chair brought from the bedroom, and tied the chair to the leg of the heaviest of the three big tables all stained with the spilling of acids. When he was firmly secured, the bodyguard retired.

And then followed a scene that was grotesque to the point of lunacy. Dr. Rakoff gave an academic discourse on Revolution!

As Vincey's arrival had apparently interrupted it in the middle, Rakoff gave a brief résumé of his opening, and then submitted his gagged and bound audience of two to a couple of hours of the sort of stuff one imagines is preached in Communist colleges, if there are such things. It was academic in the extreme, and included long readings from the work of Marz and Lassalle in German, after a polite enquiry as to whether they understood the language, followed by endless illustrations of economic fallacies on the blackboard. Rakoff walked up and down the long room, discoursing, expounding, haranguing, now and again making a dash for the blackboard to scribble a figure or a name, once stopping to drink half a glass of water before picking up the thread of his dreary, insane lecture, sometimes mopping his brow which was streaming with perspiration, sometimes wagging his finger in Vincey's face, and then wagging it in George's, as though to keep a necessary balance. . . . Once Vincey, beaten by fatigue and the awful heat of the room, dropped asleep and was awakened by taps of a ruler on his shoulder. On

and on it went, the shrill, uncontrolled voice, shouting and ranting and mumbling, until Vincey felt he would go mad. In any other circumstances, the thought that Dr. Rakoff was only able to give full rein to his crazy theories when his audience was gagged and bound would have been irresistibly comic. As it was, Vincey's nerves were strained to breaking point; and it was with a feeling of positive relief that he saw the door open and admit the three people he hated most on earth.

Dr. Rakoff stopped abruptly. Arndt helped Lady Harriet off with her cloak, and Jakobsen turned to speak to someone on the verandah. "You can both go up to the house: I will call you when I want you," he flung over his shoulder, as he finally entered the room and shut the door.

When Lady Harriet caught sight of George Fennix, she roared with laughter until the tears rolled down her cheeks.

"A turkey-cock, a turkey-cock," she gasped at length. "Louis! Franz! Did you ever see anything so funny in your life?"

George's hair was ruffled and his face nearly purple from heat and slow suffocation from his gag. His eyes, which were of a bright china blue, blazed with fury, and the veins showed like scars above his working eyebrows.

"Take the gag out," Jakobsen said peremptorily to Arndt. "He'll burst if we are not careful."

It was fully three minutes before George Fennix could speak. When he did, he did not give vent to the outburst that they were obviously expecting. He merely remarked with dignity that he strongly advised them to free him at once, for the reason that he had left a sealed paper in triplicate to be opened within six hours of any overdue absence telling the police the story of the S.I.B.V. as he knew it and advising them to arrest on suspicion everyone at Jakobsen's villa. "My servant holds one of the copies,"

he added. "As I told him I should be back by two o'clock at the latest, he will act on it at eight. You will therefore be on your way to jail by about half-past nine," he concluded amiably.

Vincey thought he saw a look of annoyance cross Jakobsen's face. However, he did not say anything, but crossed over to Vincey and began to remove his gag.

Arndt helped himself to a cigar from George's case, which was lying on a table with all the other things that his and Vincey's pockets contained.

"I was counting on something of that sort," he observed coolly, as he struck a match, "but you see it will not work, for your body will have been found long before that with Vincey's in a low 'dive' in Monte Carlo, robbed and murdered. I can tell you, Fennix, you will begin to appreciate me when I explain to you that I have fixed up the neatest, tightest little murder that ever was. I have got half a dozen witnesses who are prepared to swear that they saw you in this 'dive,' that they talked to you, that you did this and that. And there you will be with your throat cut from ear to ear, and Vincey with his head bashed in—or the other way about, if you prefer it: you can settle that between you; the brothel keeper—I must apologize by the way for the bad company I am making you keep; it is a tit-bit for the English Sunday papers—the brothel keeper will have fled, in fact she has already fled," Arndt added, looking at his watch, "and she will not be found. The place is a notorious haunt of bad characters. My witnesses are absolutely reliable, and there are all sorts of bits of seemingly circumstantial evidence that I have arranged to make the police believe you were the victims of your disgusting passions. I have just come now from putting the final touches to my work. When I laid the foundation of the plan this afternoon, I must admit I never thought I should be able to make use of it

so soon, and I had no idea that I should be able to kill two birds with one stone."

George laughed . . . contemptuous it was, a stinging laugh.

"Trust a German to have no sense of perspective," he said, and his voice was like a whip. "Why, you poor fool, you've put the rope round your own neck. Do you think the police will not see through your precious circumstantial evidence, when they read my letter? Why, in my letter I am warning them to look out for the very thing you are proposing to do. I have told them clearly that anything that looks like suicide or accident means murder, and that you and that chubby Russo-Dutch-American company promoter over there and this . . . ornament to the British aristocracy," nodding towards Lady Hetty, who was regarding him from the depths of the only comfortable chair in the room with an air of considerable amusement, "are responsible for it. It was through not being able to see an inch in front of the nose on your ugly faces that you Germans lost the war," George ended in a burst of scornful defiance, "and now, by God, you are going to lose your head! In this country they have a short way with assassins when they are Germans. . . ."

Arndt took a step forward and gave George a stinging blow in the face. If the chair in which he was strapped had not been tied to the table, it would have knocked him half across the room. A trickle of blood ran down from below his ear and stained his collar. George set his teeth. Arndt stood over him with his fist raised.

"You bloody coward!" said George distinctly.

Fennix rocked in his chair, as Arndt struck him savagely for the second time.

"I'll teach you manners," he shouted. "Before I've done with you, you will be begging me on your knees to kill you. . . ."

"I should not shout about it too much if I were you, Arndt," Vincey broke in mockingly, "because I have told off three Society of Nobles men to deal with you. Your future is far from a rosy one, my boy: if you miss the guillotine, you will be able to enjoy your rest with the knowledge that three hardy adventurers are pledged to kill you or be dishonoured for ever."

"Shut up, Vincey, or I shall have to gag you again," Jakobsen said calmly. "And we won't have any more of that sort of thing for the present, Franz; though I agree with you that Mr. Fennix can be extraordinarily aggravating at times. We have not got too much time; certainly none to waste." Jakobsen lit a cigarette and turned back to Vincey. He spoke very coolly without a trace of excitement.

"Look here, Vincey. You are going to die. You are too dangerous altogether. But there are ways of dying; some are extremely painful, others are practically instantaneous; if you answer my questions, you shall die painlessly, or as near painlessly as I can manage; if you do not, you shall die in torment. You get me? What is your name?"

"You ought to know, since you have just called me by it."

"No fooling. What is your real name?"

Vincey did not answer.

"How long have you belonged to the Society of Nobles?"

No answer.

Jakobsen shrugged his shoulders. "You refuse to answer?"

"Did you ever think I should answer?"

"To do you justice, I did not. Rakoff, heat those pincers in that furnace of yours, will you? I am sorry, Hetty, we have not got time for your . . . refined minis-

trations, but from what Franz tells me they need a good deal of preparation and—er—rather exceptional conditions. I am afraid we shall have to content ourselves with rough and ready justice.”

“‘Exceptional conditions’ is good,” chuckled Arndt, who seemed to have recovered his temper with the prospect of revenge. “By the way, Vincey, I hope you appreciated how nicely you were ‘done’ over your poker debt. It goes to my heart to think that you won’t be able to cash Louis’ half-million cheque: however, it may be some consolation to you to know that Louis has presented me with Dr. Parker’s bit of paper. Two hundred and fifty thousand francs! I shall be able to afford to send a wreath to your funeral.”

Arndt picked up Vincey’s pocket-book from the table where it lay with his watch, revolver, cigarette-case and various odds and ends from his pockets and examined it. He took Jakobsen’s cheque out, made a motion as though to tear it up, thought better of it, counted the notes the case contained and slipped it into his breast-pocket.

“You dirty thief!” Vincey observed.

“My dear fellow, be reasonable,” Arndt expostulated in a bantering tone. “It is not of the slightest use to you.”

“You are a friend of Milly Essington’s, aren’t you, Fennix?” Lady Harriet remarked, as she might have done at a dinner party.

“I do not quite see why Lady Essington should be dragged in at this juncture,” George observed coldly.

“I only wanted to know, because I shall be seeing her next week. You will still be a subject of conversation then, I shouldn’t wonder. Are not you ready yet over there? You always were the slowest and clumsiest creature God ever made, Rakoff.”

“Franz, rip Vincey’s coat up the back and bare his shoulders.”

Arndt did so, taking very good care that he should hurt his victim as much as possible in the operation. He tore off his collar and pulled his coat and shirt down over his pinioned arms, so that his back was bared. Jakobsen held a pair of long pincers, white-hot from the furnace, gingerly, as though he did not quite know what to do with them.

George could not stand it, and looked away. He felt horribly sick, and expected to hear every moment the sizzle of the flesh as it was seared with the iron. His eyes travelled to the window, and his heart missed a beat!

Through a chink in the curtains, he could see a face pressed against the glass, staring into the room. . . .

"Here, let me attend to him. You do not understand these things, Louis." It was Arndt's voice.

The face had vanished.

"Pull his head well forward . . ."

The door was suddenly flung open, there was a gust of night air, Lady Hetty jumped from her chair . . . and Jakobsen, Arndt and Rakoff found themselves looking down the muzzle of three revolvers.

There was a moment of utter, complete silence.

"Drop those pincers and put your hands up!"

Arndt dropped them with a clatter on the bare boards of the floor and raised his hands above his head.

George Fennix gazed at their rescuers in amazement, wondering who on earth they were, and how they had got there. The man who seemed to be their leader he had never seen; the others appeared vaguely familiar to him, but he could not place them for the moment. Of course! The grey-haired man with the rugged clean-shaven face was the first of the men Vincey had communicated with in the Rooms, and the tall, dark, handsome boy was the third and last of them. But the leader. Who was he? A tall slim man of middle age, probably nearer fifty than

forty, with a light pointed beard, a Van Dyck beard, flecked with grey; he was as graceful and distinguished as a greyhound, every movement betokened breeding, and his voice had a quality, a silvery quality, so pure that the words he had spoken in a low voice rang like the command of a trumpet.

"You will all please stay exactly as you are." The magic voice was speaking again. "I am referring to you too, madame." Lady Harriet had made a stealthy move towards the table on which Vincey's revolver lay. "Fugger, do you release our friend and Mr. Fennix." George noticed with surprise that his name was known to his mysterious rescuer. "Mario, the lady will not keep still. She is trying to get at that revolver over there. You had better tie her up."

Mario succeeded in doing so after a terrific struggle in which Lady Hetty bit him deep in the neck and had nearly all the clothes torn off her back. While it was going on, the leader never even glanced in their direction. He was keeping the other three covered, a pistol in each hand.

"We seem to have got here just in time," he remarked, when Vincey was finally freed, and was trying to get some feeling into his legs, cramped from being bound to the legs of the chair. The key of the handcuffs had been found on the table where one of the bodyguard had left it before retiring. "I fear though that Mr. Fennix has suffered at these people's hands," he added with concern, as Fugger severed the last of George's bonds. "Never mind, you shall have your revenge."

The last words were said in such a tone of cold diabolical ferocity that George had the inexpressible pleasure of seeing Arndt turn a pale green colour.

"Now then; you, Arndt, shall sit in that chair, and when you are duly bound, Mr. Fennix shall brand you, as you were to have branded Vincey here. I choose Mr.

Fennix because he bears marks of your or your confederates' violence."

"Look here," said George, aghast at this appalling proposal, "it is very decent of you to suggest it, and nothing would give me greater pleasure than to leave my mark on him, as he is responsible for my split ear, but I really cannot do that: 'pon my soul, I can't."

The leader glanced swiftly at George, and his left eyelid quivered.

"Very well, then, we will content ourselves with tying him up in the most uncomfortable position we can."

George was immensely relieved. The whole evening had been so much like a nightmare that for a moment he had really thought the leader, whom he was soon to know as the Doctor, had really intended him to play the part of torturer; a part which would have outraged his distinctly eighteenth-century susceptibilities.

In a few minutes, Jakobsen and Arndt were bound hand and foot in the chairs which had been occupied by Vincey and Fennix; Rakoff, with his hands handcuffed behind his back and his feet bound together, had been deposited at Mario's suggestion on the top of a small press (it took three of them and a table to get him there) so that if he moved more than a foot or so he would roll off and in all probability break his neck; George felt it was an almost adequate revenge for the lecture on Revolution; and Lady Harriet, with many apologies from the Doctor, who had exchanged his mood of icy ferocity by one of gentle mockery, had been secured in such a way that it would be many hours before she could hope to free herself without outside aid.

"We have not a moment to spare," the Doctor cried when this was done. "Is there a safe? Fugger, you go through the papers in the desk. There must be a safe somewhere. Or do they keep their papers at the house?"

"There is a small safe in a cupboard in the bedroom," said George, who had been scouting from the bedroom at the back of the pavilion, while the others secured their captives. He did not feel called upon to add that the scurrying of a mouse in the cupboard, while he was peering through the window into the darkness, had given him the "turn" of his life, and induced him to make this discovery! George had plenty of pluck as we know, but the events of the evening had been calculated to disturb the most unimpressible nervous system.

"Mario, quick . . . those must be the keys. Bring everything the safe contains in here. Don't show a light if you can help it."

Arndt and Jakobsen had submitted to being bound without attempting resistance. They realized that the game was up and that their only chance was to make as little fuss as possible. Dr. Rakoff was speechless with fear and Lady Harriet speechless with fury.

"If you do not mind, I will repossess myself of my property," Vincey remarked, taking his pocket-book from the dinner-jacket, which Arndt had flung off before undertaking the duties of executioner. "I am glad you did not destroy Jakobsen's cheque: I might have had difficulty in persuading him to write another one. Now, answer my questions and remember that I have none of Mr. Fennix's scruples. What is the address of this bagnio?"

One glance at Vincey told Arndt that his life depended on his answers: as it did, for there is nothing so liable to make a man recklessly vengeful as a pair of white-hot pincers within three inches of his bared neck. Arndt did not hesitate and gave the address.

"Were you going to have killed us here and taken the bodies there, or killed us there?"

"We were going to have killed you there."

"How were you going to have got us there without attracting attention? You cannot drive up in a car to a place of that sort."

Arndt hesitated, and glanced suddenly at Jakobsen.

Vincey took a step towards him. His eyes were blazing. "Body of God! If you don't answer . . ."

The doctor looked up quickly from his task of sorting the papers which Mario Torricelli had found in the safe: a few he stuffed in his pockets, the greater part Mario pitched into the stove, which was nearly red-hot and gave out so great a heat that they were all perspiring profusely. Fugger, who had joined him after ransacking the desk, began to say something, but the Doctor put his hand on his arm. "Let Boris alone," he said in a low tone. "It will work off in time. He is almost beside himself now, and I cannot say I wonder, either. If you cross him, he will probably kill Arndt, and that will be a bore."

"We own the house at the back," Arndt said sullenly. "There is a door between them."

"What street is it in?"

Arndt gave the name.

"I know it," the Doctor remarked, "and I am pretty sure I know the house too. The street is as quiet as quiet at night; it would be the easiest thing in the world to smuggle in two prisoners."

Vincey asked a few more questions, while the Doctor went quickly through the remaining papers, all of which he stuffed into the stove.

"We made a pretty good mess of their records—that is one satisfaction," he observed, with a smile which was almost mischievous. "Come on: there is not any time to lose, if we are to get away without a pitched battle. We scotched one sportsman who was prowling about down

by the jetty, but there are four of them left still, aren't there?"

"We must gag these people first, or they will howl the place down," Mario observed dispassionately. "Old Rasputin is all right. I shoved a bit of cotton waste into his mouth when we put him up there on the cupboard."

Vincey and Mario Torricelli "fixed" Jakobsen and Arndt, while the Doctor attended to Lady Harriet as gently as was compatible with security.

Twenty minutes later, after a slippery passage among the rocks between Jakobsen's little harbour and the adjoining cove, and a steep scramble up the short cliff, they found themselves in the lane leading to the main road. Half-way up it, a thought seemed to strike Vincey, and he made his way to a thick clump of bushes a few yards from their path from which, much to the surprise of his companions, he produced a bicycle. He had not given it a thought since he had hidden it there the previous evening! A minute afterwards, as they reached the mouth of the lane, the bulk of a large motor-car became visible, drawn up in the shadow. The bicycle was placed on the top; the five adventurers crammed inside, and the car shot away in the direction of Nice. The Doctor had decided that the only safe place in which to examine their booty and to hold a council of war was his own house; and he invited George to accompany them, since it was obviously high time that he should know something more of the adventure. One of the Doctor's most useful gifts was his skill in gauging the exact moment when he could take people into his confidence. At present George knew too much and too little. That must be remedied, and the time to remedy it was while he was feeling intensely grateful for having escaped from Jakobsen's clutches with his neck intact.

Vincey had dropped asleep in the corner of the car. He was worn out. As they swept through slumbering Villefranche, a clock struck four; and he was awakened by a jolt. A pretty full thirty hours, those last, he mused dazedly. He had twice escaped death by the skin of his teeth, he had killed a man, he had won over half a million francs, he had encountered the love of his life . . . he had had a glimpse of heaven, and he had been thrust back into uttermost darkness. For a few moments the misery of his mind and the overwhelming fatigue of his body struggled together: then fatigue conquered and he fell back into an uneasy sleep. . . .

CHAPTER XV

THE CHEVERNEY BALL AND THE MONK'S MIDNIGHT DRIVE

COURTNEY WINSPEAR felt slightly aggrieved that George and Vincey should have deserted him so casually for private convivialities—or so he thought, of their own, even when he remembered that he himself had been responsible for their acceptance of Dr. Parker's invitation to his party and that they had had very little say in the matter. Still they had acquiesced. . . . If it was anyone's fault, it was George's. Vincey had at least turned up to supper, and he had only left them afterwards on getting George's telephone message. It was true that Parker's invitation had been a very informal one; Monte Carlo was an eminently free place; and there was nothing in the world to prevent them amusing themselves in the way they preferred. All the same it was unlike George who was rather given to inveighing against the slovenliness of modern manners and was a bit of a stickler about form, to abandon them altogether. Still . . .

In spite of the strict application of the doctrine of Live and Let Live, Courtney did feel rather aggrieved when he slipped into bed in the early hours of the morning.

When he rang his bell at twenty minutes past ten, he was extremely surprised to receive a note in his sister's handwriting. Such a thing had never happened in his life before. If Avril wished to speak to him and he did not happen to be awake, she was wont to invade his room,

wake him up, perch on the bed and gossip for an hour before she remembered what it was she had wanted to talk to him about.

"What is this, Martin?" he asked in sleepy mistrust of this extraordinary innovation.

"Her Grace said you were to have this as soon as you woke, sir," Martin replied impassively, as he collected Courtney's discarded garments from different corners of the room.

"When did Her Grace give you this?" Courtney asked, fingering the letter as though he suspected it of containing an explosive.

"Just before she left for the station, sir," said Martin, retrieving a patent leather shoe from under the sofa.

"Station?" exclaimed Courtney. "Where has she gone?"

"Paris, I believe, sir, but don't you think you had better open your letter?"

"Yes, Martin, you are right." He inserted a thumb under the flap. "Are Mr. Vincey and Mr. Fennix up yet, Martin?"

"They have been out all night, sir. A strange car arrived about eight o'clock with a note for Mr. Fennix's man, who packed up some things for Mr. Fennix and Mr. Vincey and sent them off in the car. I asked the driver where he came from, and he said Nice; but he did not say who had sent him, so I thought I had better not ask."

"Quite right, Martin. Now I wonder why Her Grace has suddenly gone to Paris. Have you any ideas on the subject?"

"None whatever, sir," Martin replied, making for the door.

"Dear Courtney," Winspear read when he eventually brought himself to open the letter, "Just off to Paris with Colette. Don't be too surprised! I only decided in the

watches of the night. A few days' change will do me good, and Colette wants some frocks. Back Wednesday in time for the ball Thursday. You will have nothing to worry about: Hilda will see to everything. Have wired for rooms at the Ritz; so that will be my address in case you should want me. Jakobsen and his sister and Mr. von Arndt, a Teutonic friend, were to have dined to-night, but I have told Hilda to telephone and put them off. I hope they will not think it very rude. That does not prevent you asking them if you want to see the Baroness. Poor old boy! I had to put Jakobsen off, as he was coming specially to talk business with me. Love, Avril."

Winspear drank a cup of tea, lit a cigarette, and read the letter again. How like Avril to dash off like that at a moment's notice without giving any warning. Well, thank goodness she had taken that plump Viennese *odalisque* with her. Frocks indeed! Of course, Colette wanted frocks when Avril was there to pay for them. Avril had once told him that the only thing wrong with Colette was that she had too much heart. "Too much bosom, you mean," he had replied. There was a downrightness about the answer which pleased him. He could not stand that full-blown type. It was Avril who had too much heart. If she was not careful that bouncing adventuress would quarter herself on them for good and all. For some reason the very mention of poor Colette always threw Courtney into a bad temper.

"Martin!"

"Sir?"

"Ask Miss Bellamy if she will speak to me for a moment, please."

Courtney jumped out of bed, flung on a dressing-gown, and began brushing his hair vigorously.

"Excuse my get-up, Hilda," he said, when Miss Bellamy

arrived, looking marvellously fresh and cool. "What is all this about Avril having gone to Paris?"

"I do not know any more than you do," Hilda replied, taking a cigarette from a box on a table by the window. "She came into my room when I was dressing and announced that she and Colette were off to Paris; she said that I was to put Mr. Jakobsen and his sister off for to-night, and that whatever happened you were not to be worried!"

Courtney snorted. "Worried! Of course, I am not worried. Why should I be worried simply because she takes an Austrian play-actress off to Paris to buy her a trousseau, which I have no doubt is long overdue. It does not worry me that she should put her guests off at a moment's notice; any more than it worries me that her son's tutor and her uncle should stay out all night and send for their clothes in the morning. . . ."

Hilda went off into a peal of laughter.

"Poor old boy, you *have* got out of bed the wrong side this morning. Avril is always doing things like this. There is nothing in it. A little change will do her good. She has been a bit 'nervy' lately. And 'her son's tutor' has been back a good half-hour and is giving Jérôme his lessons. The only delinquent is 'her uncle,' who happens also to be yours! Mr. Vincey says he is staying to breakfast with the people they spent the night with, who appear to be a Russian doctor, a Swiss banker and an Italian *marchese*. So, you see, everything is quite all right and there is nothing to be worried about."

"Now I suppose I shall have that boy, Harry What's-his-name, on my hands," Courtney complained. "I think Avril might have taken him too. I am sure he is in need of a new gold watch."

"Why do you not go over to Beaulieu and see Guy

Rattray? You know you like him," Hilda suggested soothingly.

But Courtney was not to be appeased so easily.

"What does Avril mean when she says that Jakobsen was coming to talk business with her? She is not consulting him about investments, is she?"

Though Courtney spent money lavishly, he was a first-class man of business and went in terror of Avril's wilfulness and dislike of "sound" advice landing her in difficulties.

"It is the S.I.B.V., I expect," Hilda replied, pressing the end of her cigarette into an ash-tray.

"The S.I.B.V.? Oh, yes, that charity business. She is still interested in that, is she? Well, I shall go over to Cap Martin and take Parker out to lunch somewhere. You might order the Hispano for me in half an hour, Hilda, will you? And, Hilda, you might telephone and tell Parker I am coming over."

"All right," she smiled. "Anything else?"

"And you might drop Avril a line at the Ritz and tell her that I am not worried but that I wish she would lose Colette in Paris; and she might tell Charvet to make me a dozen evening shirts. As she is there, it will save me writing. And you might see that there is a good lunch in case we come back to lunch here. I do not expect we shall, but we might. Oh! I nearly forgot. I wish you would telephone to Nice and make a dentist appointment for me to-morrow. I think I've got a filling coming out or something. It is Docteur Marchand. You'll find the number in the book. Talking about books, you might find out from the library if they have got Carrington's book on cruising in the West Indies yet. I forget what it is called, but they will probably know the book I mean."

"Is that all?"

"Yes; that is all. Don't forget to tell Avril about the shirts."

We have introduced this little scene in order to show how right Vincey was when he assured George Fennix early that morning, in the library of the Doctor's house, that nothing short of the burning of the Villa Cheverney, the rape of Avril, the murder of Martin and the theft of the Hispano-Suiza, the newest of the three cars he kept for his personal use, would persuade Courtney that Jakobson, Arndt, Rakoff *et Cie*, were a danger to the world, and that it was his duty to lend a hand in destroying them. . . . Such a thought, such a suggestion, was unthinkable. It simply did not come within the bounds of Courtney's comprehension. To start with, he would not believe them, if they recounted their nocturnal adventure, for, as an experienced man of the world and as a "sound" man of business, he knew that such things did not happen outside the covers of a shilling shocker bought to beguile a railway journey; if they should succeed in convincing him that they were telling him the truth and nothing but the truth, he would say it was none of his business, ask what the police were there for, and add that if they took his advice they would leave the matter alone; and he would have a fit when he learnt that they proposed to scotch the nefarious activities of the firm by methods which were both violent and illegal. Courtney was an excellent fellow in many ways, but he did not suffer from excess of imagination and he had an intense dislike of sailing in any but very well charted waters; and the last thing to which he would ever consent would be the use of the Villa Cheverney for launching their counter-offensive. George Fennix himself had been very doubtful about the wisdom or propriety of such an action, without Avril's knowledge, until the other five, the Doctor, Vincey, Fugger, Mario Torricelli and the Grand Duke Peter, who had joined

them mysteriously as the grey light of the dawn spread over the garden and filtered through the curtains into the library, explained with varying degrees of emphasis that they dared not risk a refusal from Mme. de Cheverney, as their plan, which necessitated the isolation of Jakobsen at a given moment, could only be executed at the Villa Cheverney on the night of the ball. Up till now their plans for attacking him had been frustrated by the presence of the bodyguard or by the fact that he had been on neutral ground, which they were unable to prepare beforehand. Had George not had personal experience of the methods of the other side, it is doubtful even then, whether he would have agreed to their proposal, but the urgent necessity of smashing Jakobsen and the S.I.B.V. at once and the futility of attempting to do so by applying to the authorities (a method which would necessarily reveal the far from legal activities of the Society of Nobles with which he was secretly in sympathy) were so patent as to overcome his scruples; and he finally agreed to give them the tacit support they asked. The Grand Duke Peter, who had known Avril in days gone by, alone had supported his proposal and that in a very half-hearted manner, that they should take Avril into their confidence and appeal to the adventurous side of her nature; the others had urged that the risk of a rebuff was much too great and asserted that their plan, which in any case was likely enough to fail, was their last chance of rendering the S.I.B.V. harmless without making such a to-do that the existence of the Society of Nobles, the secret of which had been so well kept that not even George, with his access to secret and confidential information had ever heard of it, would be known to everybody with a penny to spend on a morning newspaper.

George's abduction, which had taken place as he mounted the stairs to Lady Harriet's flat, whither he had

been sent from the Hotel de Paris after leaving his cousins, the Hartopps, with whom he had spent a much longer time than he had realized, and his subsequent adventures in Dr. Rakoff's pavilion had more to do than he imagined with his acquiescence in his new friend's arbitrary scheme. In the ordinary way, neither the Doctor's magic charm nor the spirited arguments of his companions would have prevailed upon him to countenance for one moment the use to which the confusion that invariably accompanies a large ball was to be put, when that ball was given by his niece; but Arndt's exhibition of "frightfulness" had aroused in him a primeval and very undiplomatic desire for active revenge which, added to a warm feeling of gratitude towards his rescuers, who happened to be all of that manly intelligent cosmopolitan type which is as rare as it is charming, a type peculiarly sympathetic to him, made him regard the matter from an unusual angle. To put it bluntly, George wanted to get some of his own back.

After intensely strange experiences, there almost invariably comes a time of reaction when we can scarcely believe that we have not been living in a dream. Such a time came to George when, after the conference in the long book-filled room was over and the others had disappeared separately through Serafina's backyard into the morning life of the awakening town, he found himself lying at ease in a large porcelain bath waiting for the arrival of his clothes. As strange and unreal as the sudden assault that had been made upon him by Jakobsen's ruffians, and his swift chloroforming, as he mounted the stairs at Lady Harriet's, his imprisonment in the pavilion with the crazy professor, the threat of a disgraceful death and the eleventh hour rescue, was the scene that he had just left. As he plunged his limbs in the warm water, it was as in a half-remembered dream that he saw the softly-

lit beautifully proportioned room, the several thousand books in their exquisite bindings, the supper table with its broken food and long necked bottles of white wine, the haze of smoke, from behind which the Doctor's silver voice spoke of the unexpected news from Count Alexaieff in Paris, which had, so fortunately for them, made it necessary for him to seek his friends Fugger and Torricelli, whom he found supping at the Hotel de Paris, of their surprise at seeing Vincey surrounded by his enemies, of the more or less correct construction they were able to put upon the course of events, thanks to Vincey's conversation with the Doctor that morning, of the hint as to his movements that Vincey had given them in passing, of the two mysterious motor-cars which had left the house where Lady Harriet lived, and into which it had seemed to them, watching from a distant doorway, that a drunken man was being helped, of their suspicion that Vincey had been kidnapped, and of their determination to rescue him even if it meant making an armed attack on the villa at Cap Martin itself.

Were they real, those figures in the library? Young Torricelli, darkly handsome, straight as a lance, dandified in spite of a torn coat and rumpled collar, leaning gracefully against a tall-boy; the Grand Duke in a deep arm-chair, looking, with his beard and deliberately inelegant clothes, like a burly colonial farmer on a holiday; Fugger, with his fresh complexion and iron-grey hair, neat and business-like, fingering a quill pen as he examined the papers they had brought away from the villa; Vincey, haggard and white with fatigue, filling the gaps in the Doctor's talk with a few quick words of explanation, as he moved restlessly about the room; and the Doctor himself, cool, urbane, masterful, a portrait by Van Dyck. . . . Surely they must be the figments of a dream.

A tap on the door and the voice of the Doctor's valet

informing him that his clothes were laid out on the bed in the adjoining dressing-room rapidly dispersed his doubts on the subject; and the smell of roasting coffee reminded him that waking life had its compensation.

The week until the ball passed comparatively uneventfully. Vincey spent most of his spare time with the Doctor; Winspear spent the greater part of his time, all of which was spare, with Dr. Parker, whom he had persuaded to leave the Cap Martin Hotel and to take up his abode at the Villa Cheverney; and George divided his time into three, spending one-third with his host and fellow guests, one-third with his brother and sister-in-law at the Negresco in Nice (their arrival with secretary, maid, valet and chauffeur created almost as gratifying a sensation as that which was probably enjoyed by George's grandfather arriving in Nice, a very different Nice, on his wedding journey in his own travelling carriage eighty years before) and one-third, by far the most pleasant, in the company of Vincey and the Doctor.

Lord Fennix, rather ruffled by the comments of the *Cosmos* but quickened by his wife into taking an imposing view of his own importance, entertained and was entertained by Jakobsen, conferred daily for several hours with Francis Hanbury, the chief of the British secretariat, George's former colleague at Stockholm and most suspect person of his acquaintance, who, George guessed, bridged the gulf between Lord Fennix's gullibility and Jakobsen's dishonesty, and patronized self-consciously and conscientiously everyone connected with or interested in the S.I.B.V. Arndt he took to in particular, and invited George to meet him at lunch. That however, George considered too much of a good thing altogether; and he replied that he could not stand Germans, even when they were raised to the level of ordinary humanity by being connected with the S.I.B.V., an answer which displeased

Lord Fennix, who was of opinion that Germans should be encouraged to take an active part in the establishment of S.I.B.V. (*a*) because as a nation they had a talent of organization, (*b*) so as to give them an opportunity of proving to the world that their mentality had changed since the publication of Lord Bryce's report on the atrocities in Belgium; an opinion which amused George so much that he repeated it to Vincey.

To Vincey the week was one of unrelieved gloom, a depression of spirits so profound that he would have almost welcomed a skirmish with the other side, had they shown the slightest inclination for one; which, however, they apparently did not, since they gave no sign of existence. The transference of five hundred thousand francs, or rather more, from Jakobsen's account to that of the Society of Nobles (Vincey, thanks to pre-Revolution investments in England, France and America, had an income sufficient for his own needs) did not succeed in arousing in him more than a fleeting feeling of satisfaction; the ever-present anxiety, which had been up till now a stimulus, began to take serious toll of his reserve of nerve force; and the routine of his duties, which incidentally he executed with exemplary thoroughness, became a nightmare to him. If Avril had not been away in Paris, his position would have been past bearing. On the one hand, he had his duty towards the Society of Nobles, the company of his creating, the instrument of his creed, and on the other his duty towards Avril. The one bade him stay in her house at all costs until his mission was accomplished, the other commanded him in the name of common decency to go away for good as he could not in common decency explain the scene on the terrace at Monte Carlo of which she had been a witness. Vincey was a man with a very high sense of honour, he was an honest thinker, and he was physically brave to a fault, but he

was highly strung and like all highly strung people liable to fits of depression in which that variously seasoned dish, which we call life, became a mess of offal almost unfit for human stomach. The Doctor, who had known him since he was a boy and who understood him, was his one support during this time. Bit by bit, he had extracted the story of his love for Avril and the tangle that had been caused in lovers' knot by Wanda's crazy infatuation. His sympathy and exquisite tact, an ornament to robust common sense, helped Vincey to feel the ground under his feet again, and even though the ground was painfully stony it had the good effect of stimulating his sense of reality and of enabling him to make a call upon that very special reserve of courage which well-plucked people keep for emergencies.

Though he did not know it, these days, during which the underground struggle between Jakobsen and the Society of Nobles seemed to have reached a stalemate, had one good effect: they enabled him to withdraw from the immediate preoccupation of active warfare and to glimpse the battleground from a less restricted view-point. For example, it had seemed almost impossible to him, who knew from personal experience Jakobsen's character and the lengths to which he was prepared to go to attain his ends, that other people did not see through him too: it had become a matter for amazement that Jakobsen's designs on Avril's fortune did not leap to the eye of the most indifferent, a thing of incredibility that Lord Fennix and his co-directors should not see that they were lending themselves to the most colossal fraud which had been perpetrated since the dawn of history, a physiological phenomenon worthy of investigation that people did not automatically shrink from that synthesis of cruelty, corruption and sexual perversion known to the world as Lady Harriet Tuff.

Jakobsen was rich, intelligent, highly cultivated, the secretary of a great charity which was, if not yet officially recognized by the nations of the world, at least personally supported by some of their most prominent citizens. The creation of the *Société de Bonne Volonté et de Secours Mutuel* had only been made possible by the help of very rich people, who were able to subscribe the vast sum necessary to cover the initial expenses. What, then, was more natural than that Jakobsen should hope to interest the Duchesse de Cheverney, the third richest woman in the world, in the Society, and obtain financial aid which she could very well afford to give.

Lord Fennix and his co-directors believed profoundly in Jakobsen; his manner was businesslike, conciliatory, pleasantly confidential; they realized that he was indispensable; and though they none of them knew anything about him, they all thought that the others did. And finally, Lady Harriet was not the only woman in the world who had been twice divorced; she was not the only person who had lost a sensational action for libel and missed prosecution for perjury by an aeroplane journey to the Continent while the Director of Public Prosecutions was making up his mind (at least her friends said she wasn't); she was a traveller of real distinction; and if scandals, duels, suicides, and the whisper of certain financial transactions, which the censorious ungenerously called blackmail, seemed invariably to follow in her wake, there were a lot of back-biters in the world who were only too ready to exaggerate the high-spirited peccadilloes of one who was constitutionally unable to accept the drab conditions of present-day life.

In spite, however, of the prevailing attitude towards Jakobsen and the S.I.B.V., Vincey would have supported George's suggestion of making a clean breast of everything to Avril, if it had not been for his desperately un-

fortunate encounter with her on the terrace at Monte Carlo. If that had not occurred, he was pretty sure that she would have been heart and soul with them, for with George's testimony added to his own she could not but be convinced of the truth of their story; and her allegiance would have meant much: it would have meant that there was no chance of any of her money going to the S.I.B.V. . . . though he did not think it would have meant that she would allow them to operate in their next attack from the Villa Cheverney itself, as they intended to do; for she would never invite a man to partake of her hospitality when she knew that harm would come to him thereby. But there was no way in which the scene with Wanda could be explained. Vincey would have died the most ingeniously painful death Arndt could have devised several times over rather than tell her the truth, that he was the unwilling prisoner of Wanda's arms, that he had not participated in her extravagantly indiscreet embrace: not because he suffered from any false pride, but simply because no woman in her senses, who had seen as much as Avril had seen, would have believed him. She would merely have thought him hypocrite and liar as well as lecher, and have despised him even more than she did already. So it came about that Vincey said nothing; and he and his friends laid their trap for Jakobsen; with what success we shall see.

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Of the private balls given on the Côté d'Azur that winter, that of the Duchesse de Cheverney was considered the most brilliant. Even George, who was an experienced judge of such things, admitted that he had seldom seen anything to surpass it in magnificence.

The villa was admirably adapted for entertaining on a large scale, Avril and Courtney put no limit to the sums they were prepared to disburse, Hilda, who had a real

talent for organization, worked like one possessed, helped by Harry Raphael, Guy Rattray, Mr. Palairret, Dr. Parker, George (occasionally) and Vincey (when his tutorial duties and his mysterious absences permitted it); Savona's, by the aid of goodness knows how many thousand rare blooms, turned the hall, living-rooms, staircase and ballroom into a fairy garden, without hard garden seats and gritty gravel paths, and Monsieur Florian in the kitchen, aided by Signor Ercole Boffa, determined to show the ignorant what a ball supper was like when it was prepared by masters of their art for the delectation of the elect.

It was a costume ball; and Courtney, who had waxed unexpectedly enthusiastic over this side of the entertainment, had insisted that the various disguises should remain a close secret until the house-party met for dinner on the evening itself.

Avril and Colette had returned from Paris the previous night. Colette, with a new trunk filled with new clothes (she had never known Avril in so generous a mood), betrayed a lazy satisfaction with everything, getting back, having a new outfit, smoking Courtney's special brand of Egyptian cigarettes with which the various cigarette-boxes in the house were filled, kissing Harry, seeing George, who had missed her, though he was too wise to say so, and having plenty of time for the leisurely contemplation of her own beauty to which, owing to Avril's energetic habits and insistence on keeping dressmakers' appointments to the minute, she felt she had given insufficient attention during the past week. Avril was graciousness itself, a trifle offhand to Vincey, George thought. Her "Well, Mr. Vincey, I hope you have hit on a good dress for to-morrow night" was not over-cordial. The words were amiable enough, but there was something in the tone he did not understand. It surprised him too that

Vincey should have slipped away to his own room as soon as Avril arrived, instead of sitting up with the rest of them over the special brew of punch which Courtney delighted in making when an occasion offered or an appropriate excuse could be found. George did not agree with the general opinion that Avril looked all the better for her change. She appeared to him thinner and rather feverish; there was something unnatural in her unwonted vivacity, overstrained. . . .

Needless to say, when they met in the drawing-room before dinner, which had been put forward three-quarters of an hour, there was great excitement over the dresses: the secret had been well kept and no one save Harry, who had proved invaluable in making everybody up, adjusting ribbons, suggesting, or rather commanding, for he soon became the recognized master of the revels, the wearing of appropriate jewellery, had the slightest idea what the others were going as. Courtney, who was rather given to descending periodically from his lofty perch of detachment and discovering good qualities in those he had previously disparaged, was so taken with Harry's aptitude for ceremonial and his confident management of the masquerade that he swore he was worth a fat retaining fee just to preside at their yearly ball; and he at once began planning occasions by land, sea and air, which would afford further scope for Harry's newly-discovered talent.

The new master of the revels, himself a Harlequin, slim and lithe and graceful, posed Avril before the fireplace at one end of the flower-filled room and introduced her court one by one.

Avril was dressed after a family portrait of the Duchesse de Cheverney, whose husband, the friend of Saint Simon, played a short but brilliant part at the Court of Louis XIV, after the fall of the Duc de Lauzun, whose disgrace he was supposed at the time to have as-

sisted in a manner which reflected more favourably on his wit than on his sincerity. Very magnificent she was, with brocaded dress and jewelled stomacher, *parure* of the period, her thick tawny hair falling in tight curls to her shoulders. She was attended by Jérôme in the dress of a court page of those days.

The first to be introduced was Courtney, a *mignon* of Henri III in doubtlet and hose, ruffles, plumed hat, *bilboquet* in hand, who took his place beside her. George Fennix came next, in a dress copied from the portrait by Sir Joshua Reynolds of another George Fennix, a beau of 1760, the friend of Hervey and Pembroke, a fine eighteenth-century gentleman, whose curious entries in the betting book at White's and occasional appearances in the memoirs of the times give us a glimpse of a whimsical character, cynical and disillusioned, but not wholly unlovable. Colette as Françoise-Athénais de Rochechouart, Marquise de Montespan, opulent and sprightly, Dr. Parker in the sombre habit of a monk, Hilda as gentle Nell Gwynn, and Vincey, a dashing d'Artagnan, were presented one by one.

By ten o'clock, most of the guests had arrived and dancing was in full swing.

As Wanda had a headache sufficiently serious to prevent her attending the ball (she had been ailing the whole week), Jakobsen and Arndt arrived in company with Lady Hetty and Tuff, with whom they had dined on the way. Jakobsen had by chance chosen the same dress as Dr. Parker, that of a monk, Arndt had secured from Nice the costume of Tamerlane, a faint reflection, Vincey imagined, of his central Asian triumphs, Lady Harriet was a *Merveilleuse*, and Tuff a desperately sober jester, thanks to Lady Harriet's rationing system.

When the last guests had arrived, Avril turned from the contemplation of the hall, deserted save for two footmen

on duty, to find Jakobsen in conversation with Courtney. He was explaining Wanda's absence. "I was just telling your brother, Duchesse, that this part of the world does not seem to suit my sister at all. In fact, I am taking her away to-morrow to a little place I own in Italy, on the lake of Garda, and I very much doubt if we shall come back—anyhow this year."

"You are going away?" Avril exclaimed in surprise. "Is not this very sudden?"

"Well, no: not exactly," Jakobsen replied with his slow smile. "My work is done here. I have met all the people I wanted to meet. Some I have succeeded in interesting in the S.I.B.V.; with others I have failed." He sighed, and then smiled; the smile of a philosopher. "I shall take a short holiday which I badly need, just ten days or a fortnight, and then go on to Berne, where I am wanted. We've got to settle definitely on the site for our building. I do not mind admitting to you who have been so sympathetic, Duchesse, that the S.I.B.V. is going through a crisis. All we want to tide us safely over it is a little help and goodwill, two things which seem to be at a premium these days. Some of the people we counted on most have let us down, and others seem to take malicious pleasure in trying to do us harm. It is a pity, but there it is."

Jakobsen smiled again, and Avril, who did not much appreciate his manner, which was rather that of a teacher pained by the unreason of his pupils, broke in with a certain firmness: "There are some people, Mr. Jakobsen, myself among them, who are prepared to help your cause with ordinary subscriptions, the subscriptions we should be prepared to give to other deserving causes, until we are assured that it is such a big thing that it is worth the great efforts you are seeking. We are not really lukewarm; it's just that we want to be sure that the S.I.B.V. is what it is

claimed to be. When we are convinced of that, we shall be prepared to support it more generously."

Courtney had been called away and they were alone. Jakobsen, looking unexpectedly monk-like in his costume, regarded Avril gravely. For once he was not smiling. "Am I to take it, then, that you definitely go back on the offer you made me of two million dollars for our cause?"

Avril hesitated.

"I never made you a definite offer of anything," she said at length. "In the course of conversation, you said that two million dollars was the amount you required to launch the S.I.B.V. successfully, and I said that I would see whether I could not raise the money. A few days later, a week I think it was, I wrote to you that I did not see my way to finding the money. There was no question of my promising you anything."

"Well, I will not traverse your view of the situation," Jakobsen said in his calm voice. "After you sent that letter, we had a conversation, if you remember, and you seemed disposed to reconsider your refusal to find the money. You even appointed a meeting, which I quite understand you were unable to keep, at which you were going to give me an answer one way or the other. May I say, in parenthesis, that it is the hope of receiving a favourable answer which has kept me here? Otherwise, I should have left for Italy at the end of last week. Please do not think, Duchesse, that I am complaining in any petty spirit; but I should like to know quite definitely whether I can count on your help, not in the future, but now. It is now that matters: and I am telling you no more than the truth when I say that the whole future of the S.I.B.V., its success or its failure, depends on your reply. I am sorry to have to press you like this, but my departure admits of no further delay—in fact when I leave your ball, I shall go straight home, discard my monastic

attire and leave for Italy within the hour—for if your reply is unfavourable I shall have to take immediate steps to get that money somehow. It will be difficult, but that money I must have to save the S.I.B.V. . . . and I am going to get it!”

Up to that very minute Avril had not quite made up her mind. She was torn between her anger with Vincey, a desire to hurt him by giving the money which he had urged her to withhold, and the arguments that George had advanced, which had impressed her more than she cared to own. Still in doubt, yet moved by Jakobsen's words, which rang wonderfully true, she glanced at him swiftly . . . and that glance decided her.

“I am sorry. I cannot do it,” she said firmly.

Jakobsen's mistake had lain in wearing the habit of a monk. If he had gone as anything else, if he had worn doublet and hose, if he had draped himself in a *burnous* or a bath towel, if he had blackened his face like a Christy Minstrel or whitened it like a clown, she might have given him the money . . . and the end of this story would have been entirely different. You see, in any other dress he would have been disguised, just as he was disguised in his Savile Row clothes; he would have been shrewd, plump, smiling Mr. Jakobsen with a slight American accent, dressed up as Richelieu or George Washington, just as he was shrewd, plump, smiling Mr. Jakobsen with a slight American accent, dressed up as a financier; but in his monk's dress, the simplest of all earthly coverings, he was stripped of all disguise; he was himself, cunning and cruel and false; the clever, twinkling eyes became the inhuman eyes of a fanatic, the thin-lipped humorous mouth was pitiless and evil, the chubby well-shaved face hypocritical and sly. For the first time Avril saw him as he really was . . . and she shuddered.

“I cannot do it,” she repeated.

Jakobsen bowed slightly. "I pray you will forgive me for keeping you so long from your guests," he said.

For some reason which she could not understand, Avril felt suddenly frightened.

"There is Lady Fennix over there. It is the first time she has been to my house . . . if you will excuse me. . . ."

As Avril moved away, Jakobsen folded his arms, monk-like, in the sleeves of his habit and stood motionless, deep in thought. He was making a calculation; and in his intense preoccupation and stillness one might have thought him a real monk pondering on the vanity of human desire.

A fine gentleman and a musketeer were watching him from the gallery which looked down upon the hall.

"Gad!" murmured the fine gentleman, "if Jakobsen is not an unfrocked monk I'll eat my hat."

"Shouldn't wonder," d'Artagnan replied. "He's a fool to come dressed like that; it gives him away. His neck is much longer than I thought it was; instead of looking like a chubby cherub he looks like a . . ."

"Sort of Jonathan Wild," suggested the beau.

"Perhaps. Would it catch you, Fennix?"

"What?"

"The trap we have laid for him. It would not catch me."

"It all depends how the message is given to him. Is your man a good actor?"

"Pretty fair, I should think: anyhow he has only got to say half a dozen words and his clothes are an exact copy of those the real footmen wear; and Jakobsen has never seen or heard of him."

"Who is going to gag him?"

"Two of my men, whom I've sent for specially. It would never do to rely on Fugger or Mario Torricelli or anyone they might ever have seen. He probably has a

spy here somewhere among all these hundreds of strange chauffeurs and footmen. I know I should have. My men look like an ordinary chauffeur and a footman, and if he has a spy knocking about he will not recognize them. I am going to leave the gagging part of the business to them. I shall be at the wheel of the car waiting to clear out the second they shove him inside."

"Jakobsen's disappearance will be a nasty shock to my brother," George said with a rueful smile. "He is more and more convinced that Jakobsen and the S.I.B.V. are the means by which he is going to make our name resound from London to Peking. It is his great ambition, you know, to make a name for himself. He is terrified at the thought of going down to posterity as the seventh Viscount Fennix, *tout court*. The dear old chap wants to be known as Fennix the Pioneer of International Philanthropy or something of that sort. It is rather pathetic. He has got a heart of gold, but about as much initiative, pioneering push, so to speak, as young Harry—rather less. And Jakobsen was his opportunity, or so he thought. . . ."

"You need not worry too much about him," Vincey said with a smile. "If Jakobsen lured him into this, Hanbury will see him safely out. When it is known that Jakobsen has disappeared and that there is no money in the coffer—for I expect most of it has gone to Moscow already; that is why they are in such straits—Hanbury will at once turn his and your brother's visit down here to good account; if it had not been for them Jakobsen's scheme would have been successful, etc., etc., etc.; and Lord Fennix will get the reputation of being a shrewd man of affairs whom it is impossible to hoodwink, the saviour of his fellow directors, all that sort of thing."

George laughed. "Perhaps you are right. I think we can certainly trust Hanbury to turn anything that may

happen to his own advantage. I say, Vincey, I bet you a hundred francs you do not ask Lady Harriet to dance!"

"Nothing doing. All the same I must manage to draw their attention to me in some way or other now, so that I can slip away in a minute or two. I do not want them to smell a rat. 'I bet Vincey is up to trouble; I have not seen him about anywhere,' that sort of thing. I think I shall show myself in the ball-room for a few minutes."

"And I shall continue the task of convincing my sister-in-law that we are not a pack of dope-fiends and that Avril's friends are just as respectable as her own. I am afraid she is thoroughly disappointed. I am sure she had hopes that every other dance would be a can-can."

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Shortly after supper, a Columbine, a Jester, a Mephistopheles, a Diane de Poitiers and a Monk ran laughing from the house and made their way in the direction of the Grecian temple. The spring night was wonderfully warm and balmy with a waning moon; the garden a perfect place of refreshment for the flushed dancers. Half-way across the lawn the monk stopped, as though he had suddenly remembered something, and turned back towards the house. He had in fact remembered that he had left his cigarette case on the table at which he had been supping with his companions. As he approached the house, a footman came towards him.

"Excuse me, sir."

"What is it?" asked the monk, with a slight American accent.

"There is a man asking for you, sir. We do not know who he is and he won't say—a rather wild-looking man with a beard. He seems to have had an accident, for he is covered with blood. . . ."

"An accident!" exclaimed the monk.

"Yessir, he seems to be badly hurt. Between our-

selves, sir, I should say he had got a couple of bullets in him. All we can get out of him is that he has come from Cap Martin and must see you at once."

"Cap Martin!"

The monk gave the footman a keen look.

"Where is he?"

"I will show you, sir, if you will follow me," the man replied, leading the way towards a distant angle of the house where the servants' quarters lay.

Fifteen minutes later, Vincey slipped in the clutch of the Doctor's big Fiat, which had been stationed close to the gate of the dark, deserted kitchen-garden, separating the flower garden from the servants' part of the house, and crept as unobtrusively as possible up the drive. For once he reflected his conscience was clear. Was it his fault if two unprincipled adventurers had deposited an unconscious monk in the tonneau just as he was about to take the air in the car the kind Doctor had lent him? Had he heard the bump of the heavy body when they hoisted him in? If he had, he had not even looked round; it is unnecessary perhaps to explain that that was because he was keeping a look-out ahead, in case anyone should come upon them unawares from the irregular collection of out-houses and offices which bounded the villa at that end. Had he really heard a quick, whispered "Right away, Boris!" half a second before it pleased him to start his night drive into the country? Surely not.

There is no necessity to give Vincey's itinerary in detail. It is enough to say that a couple of hours from leaving the Villa Cheverney, after following good roads and bad, roads which were specially constructed for high-speed motor-cars, and roads which were not meant for motor-cars at all, he found himself deep in the hinterland of the Maritime Alps, on a deserted hill track heading straight for a pine forest at the base of a gigantic snow

mountain, which he knew to be on the frontier-line between France and Italy. The track became worse and worse. Great boulders encroached upon the path, the wheels skidded on the icy surface, now and again a weight of snow would fall plump into the car from an overhanging and over-loaded branch. Suddenly a low voice hailed him out of the deep blue twilight. On his left, in a little clearing, there was a woodman's hut; outside it a motor-car and three figures in heavy motoring coats.

"Have you got him all right?" Vincey recognized the Doctor's voice, as he pulled up the car.

"Yes; unless he has frozen to death."

Vincey jumped down while Mario and Fugger hauled a conscious but speechless monk out of the car. His assailants had thoughtfully pulled his hood over his head, and it was a moment before they recognized him.

It was Dr. Parker!

CHAPTER XVI

IN WHICH SOME OF OUR FRIENDS RECEIVE A DISAGREEABLE SURPRISE AND VINCEY PREPARES TO PAY FATE'S RANSOM

THERE are some *mauvais quarts d'heure* over which it is only decent to draw a veil. The particular one which followed the liberation of Dr. Parker is a case in point. Suffice it to say that it was only thanks to the doctor's tact and firmness, aided by a flask of old brandy and a fur-coat, for Vincey had been very near the mark when he had suggested that his prisoner was in all probability nearly frozen to death, which succeeded in bringing Dr. Parker to a frame of mind in which he would consider the reception of an apology at all.

It is easy to see how the mistake occurred. Vincey's friends, new-comers, who had never seen Jakobsen before he had been pointed out to them that evening and who knew nothing about Dr. Parker, had mistaken one for the other, thanks to their wearing similar disguises and the message although couched in rather strange terms, had naturally, when delivered by a servant wearing the Cheverney livery, and therefore presumably knowing him by sight since he was staying in the house, made Parker think that he was wanted, in his capacity as doctor, to attend a wounded man. He had not quite understood about the man wanting to see him at once and asking for him by name, but he had put that down, in so far as he had thought about it at all, to a misunderstanding on the part of the footman, and only saw that he was being called upon as the only doctor present, or anyhow as the

doctor of whom the servants would naturally think first . . . with the result that he had been sandbagged in a lonely corner of the kitchen-garden, gagged, bound, and flung into a motor-car to be dragged out two hours later, perished with cold in a snow-covered clearing in a mountain fir-wood.

As the Doctor admitted, it was a situation which needed some explaining. . . . We will spare the reader an analysis of Vincey's feelings. This book is not a tragedy, and we have no wish to harrow him (or her). All the same, Vincey and the Doctor found something waiting for them on their return to the Villa Cheverney which seemed a tragedy, and a major one, at the time!

On the way back, the Fiat punctured, and Vincey stopped to change a tyre. Parker and the Doctor, who were in the back, jumped out to help him. The former tapped Vincey on the shoulder and held out his hand. "Put it right there, Vincey, and say no more about it. Your friend has been explaining things a bit and I guess I have got the hang of the situation. I may add that I am with you all the way; and a cold in the head is not the only reason that I wish you had eloped with that damned skunk instead of with me."

Vincey "put it there," and Parker's good feeling went a long way towards dissipating his mortification and distress at the appalling blunder for which he was largely responsible.

The failure of their *coup* had made it necessary, Vincey judged, to make a clean breast of everything to Avril. Even if Parker agreed to keep silence his absence would undoubtedly have been noticed and there was no plausible tale to meet the case.

The February dawn was breaking as he turned the car in at the gates of the villa. Although the last guests must have been gone some time and the house should have been

indulging in repose after the festivities, there seemed to be a certain amount of movement in the vicinity. Fennix's servant and one of the English footmen were pushing bicycles up the drive, a car was throbbing at the door, and, as he pulled up, George Fennix, still in his masquerade dress and looking harassed and uneasy, came out of the house. His face brightened a little at sight of them.

"Thank God you are back! Come in here quickly. . . . You, too, Doctor. You are wanted more than anyone."

He led the way into a small seldom-used room off the hall, the depository of fishing tackle, lawn tennis rackets and so on.

"What has happened?" Vincey asked anxiously. "Has any harm come to the Duchesse?"

"Not directly," George replied firmly. "Jérôme has disappeared."

"Good God!"

"He was last seen about supper-time, but we only discovered he was missing after everyone had gone. We have spent the last hour and a half searching the house and the grounds, but he is not to be found anywhere. Jakobsen has got him, of course. Nothing easier . . . probably did it through Lady Harriet. The boy knows her as a friend of his mother's, and would suspect nothing if she enticed him down to the lower garden where he could have been kidnapped easy as winking."

"And the Duchesse . . ." began Vincey.

"I have told her and Courtney everything. I had to do so. When I found you and Parker were not there, but Jakobsen was, I guessed what had happened—it's the sort of thing which *would* happen to-night of all nights—Avril and Courtney know about that, too; I told my suspicions. Now look here, with a great deal of difficulty I have persuaded them not to call in the police at all. If once we do that Jakobsen and Co. will get the wind up,

Jérôme will be spirited away and we will run a very good chance of never seeing him again. At present he has only been gone a few hours, four at the most, so he cannot have gone very far, anyhow not so far that we may not find him yet if you mobilize every Society of Nobles man you have got down here and tell them to concentrate on finding him. The police will take a week to get the thousand and one different points of all this straight in their heads; and then it will put them on to something so big that Jérôme will be forgotten in the pursuit of the big game—not to mention the fact that it will blow the Society of Nobles sky-high as far as secrecy is concerned. Avril and Courtney in their present state don't care a damn what happens to anybody so long as they get Jérôme back, and that is quite understandable. They both think they have been abominably badly used, and one cannot altogether blame them. If the Society of Nobles cannot find Jérôme within forty-eight hours, we shall have to keep quiet and wait for the other side to make a move. It is blackmail, of course . . . question of ransom . . . and Avril will just have to pay up. But whatever happens, for Jérôme's sake, for your sake, for their sakes, for my sake, the police must not be called in. So far I have managed to keep it fairly quiet in the house. Only the English servants, all of whom are trustworthy, have been told. The others are all in bed and know nothing."

"Does Mme. Brandstetter know? And Miss Bellamy?" Vincey asked. He was white as a ghost.

"Yes, they know." Fennix turned to the Doctor. "Everything depends on you, Doctor," he said earnestly. "You have got to push some sense into their heads, and I don't mind telling you it is going to be a damned difficult job, probably the most difficult job you have ever had in your life. Avril is raging—there is literally no other word for it—to use the conventional simile she is like a

lioness robbed of her young; and Courtney is in a worse state, because he is not only furious but as obstinate as hell; and for the moment he can visualize nothing but a policeman. I have done my best with them, but from their point of view I do not show up too well in this business myself. I am relying on your tact. If you cannot convince them that the best way to get Jérôme back is to keep things quiet and let the Society of Nobles take the matter in hand, we shall not only lose Jérôme for good, for Jakobsen will do away with the boy if he is likely to be a danger to them, but start a scandal which will flame across Europe."

"I will do my best," the Doctor replied calmly. "The plan you suggest is a wise one. We have agents, dozens of them in all sorts of different capacities, all down this coast and scattered over North Italy. If they cannot trace the boy, nobody can. There is one thing of which you can be quite certain, and that is that Jakobsen will have covered his own tracks all right. He and his immediate associates will be as innocent as new-born babes. We shall not find Jérôme being smuggled about as Jakobsen's nephew or anything of that sort. They have probably hidden him somewhere in the neighbourhood, this side of the border, so that they can produce him quickly when his ransom is settled. Now, if you will present me to Mme. de Cheverney, I will see if I cannot make them see our point of view. The police would spell ruin for many reasons: one, and a very important one, is that, thanks to Boris getting hold of their private directory, we have got a good many little schemes on hand and we simply cannot have the police nosing about. If they did so, we should be forced to act precipitately and the chances are that there would be a general bust-up in which everybody would get hurt. Now then, I suppose I had better see them alone."

George glanced at Parker, who had been listening intently without saying a word.

"Are you prepared to back us up?" George asked.

"As I told our friend Vincey here an hour back, I am with you all the way. If you are of opinion that I can be of any help by butting in, I promise you I'll butt in good and strong. You have only got to say the word."

"Good man. That is splendid. Courtney thinks a lot of you." George put his hand on Vincey's shoulder. "I am sorry, old chap, but the best thing for you to do is to run into Nice and stay at the Doctor's until we have settled this immediate question. I am afraid both my relatives are in an absurdly unreasonable humour for the moment . . . rotten, but there it is. . . ."

"Yes, that is best. You go home and wait for me, Boris. I'll be with you in an hour or two," the Doctor said; and then added in Russian, which he did not know Fennix understood. "Keep a stout heart. The game is not over yet. You shall have a chance to retrieve what is lost."

The two and a half hours that Vincey spent waiting for the Doctor to return from the Villa Cheverney were among the worst in his life. He cursed his folly and his carelessness. Why had he not looked to see if it was really Jakobsen whom they had flung into the back of the car? Why had he not thought of Jakobsen striking at them through Jérôme? Why? Why? Why? Thanks to him, they had lost the game. It was due to him that the boy, whom he had come to love, was in danger of his life. It was through him that Avril was almost driven to distraction. There came a moment when he thought of blowing his brains out. He was no good in the world; he was a positive danger to his friends; the woman he loved with all his heart and soul despised and loathed him. . . . The Russian in him jumped at this way out of his

disgrace; but the English strain (his maternal grandmother was English) gave the needed spur to his courage by murmuring contemptuously, "Too easy."

A servant came in with some breakfast on a tray, but the thought of food nearly choked him. Would the Doctor never come? Had he been able to persuade them to leave matters in the hands of the Society of Nobles? Would he be able to convince Courtney, one of the most obstinate men on earth? Finally, when Vincey, spent with anxiety, had ceased his endless tramp up and down the library and had flung himself into a chair, the door opened and the Doctor appeared. He was grave, but by the light in his eyes Vincey knew that he had not failed.

"No news of the boy, of course," he said at once, "but they have agreed to leave matters in our hands. I do not mind telling you, Boris, it was a struggle. The lady saw reason; her only thought is to get the boy back somehow—but the brother! It was lucky we had Parker there. Invaluable fellow! I could not do anything with Winspear, but our friend talked to him in his strange Western tongue, and eventually managed to soothe him. I have been spending the last hour using their telephone. Dangerous, but we must get the word to our friends as quickly as possible. There is a lot to do yet though."

"Is she . . . ?" Vincey began.

"I am afraid she is, my poor Boris. However, there is no need to despair. We will find the boy, and then when he is returned safe and sound we will find a way of putting you right with her." The Doctor gave Vincey's arm a squeeze. "You have not eaten any breakfast. That is bad. Ring the bell for fresh coffee and we will breakfast together. I am going to send you careering all over the country in a minute—so you must start well-lined."

When Vincey returned late that night after getting into touch with many of their adherents, whose occupations

made them difficult to communicate with, except personally, he found the Doctor writing at his table.

"Any news?" he asked eagerly.

"None of the boy, but I did not expect any yet."

Vincey pulled off his tight-fitting racing cap and dropped into a chair. He had been driving the big Fiat and had spared neither the car nor himself.

"Jakobsen, Baroness Lewel, a maid and a valet," the Doctor observed, "motored to Vingtmille this morning and took the *rapide* there for Genoa. Further destination unknown, but presumably the *villino* he owns on the Lago di Gardo. He would go by Genoa and Milan. No boy with them or anyone who could be a boy disguised: usual luggage. Arndt left the Cap Martin villa at eleven o'clock with all his traps and has gone to stay in Monte Carlo, the Hotel Majestic. He lunched with Lady Harriet and spent the afternoon with Tuff, chiefly in the Rooms gambling. Lady Harriet spent the day indoors. The boy cannot be in the flat because they made no difficulty about letting Louise in when she brought a dress back from the cleaners. You remember Louise? That clever little girl Fugger got hold of—she was something in Lausanne."

Vincey nodded. "Anything from the Villa Cheverney?" he asked.

"I have just had Fennix on the telephone. They have told some yarn to the servants about his having gone over to Cannes with the Marquise de Bussy to stay for a few days to play with her two kids. Pretty thin, but let us hope they did not notice that he was not in her car when she left this morning. Fennix and Parker have had another talk to the Duchesse and Winspear, and he says they are much more reasonable. The trouble from Mme. de Cheverney's point of view is that you did not take her into your confidence. She seems to feel rather bitterly about that." The Doctor hesitated. "Fennix seems to

think that you must have had some talk with her when it would have been good tactics to put your cards on the table. She remembers it, or rather so he gathers from something she let drop, and has drawn the conclusion that because you did not take advantage of that opportunity you had every intention of fooling her to the top of your bent. That seems to be her grievance. I suppose it was the occasion you mentioned, the afternoon of the day you and Fennix got kidnapped. Fennix had your things packed up and sent over here. I have put you in the room next to mine overlooking the garden, by the way. Rakoff is still at the villa and all five of the bodyguard are there. Needless to say the whole lot, from Arndt downwards, are shadowed by our men. I have got through to Milan, Turin and Genoa, so they are on the lookout there, and Mario—really that boy is a treasure—has got bands of super-Fascisti or something of the sort, his push, anyway, scouring the mountain villages along the frontier.”

“What is the next job for me?” Vincey asked.

“Supper and bed,” the Doctor replied. “There will be plenty more work for you to-morrow.”

There was: though not of the Doctor’s finding. A letter, bearing the Genoa postmark, arrived for Vincey at the Villa Cheverney by the first post and was handed to him half an hour later by Fennix’s servant whom Fennix had sent over at once in a car. That letter was the beginning of the end.

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That was Saturday.

Shortly before midday, the Doctor presented himself at the Villa Cheverney. When Grove informed him that Mme. de Cheverney was at home but Mr. Winspear was out and would not be back for lunch, he heaved a sigh of relief. Courtney with his “Why? Why? Why? I don’t

see . . . I can't understand" . . . his harkings back, his refusal to change his angle of view, and his tenacious hold on inessentials, went as near exasperating him as anything ever did. George had been driven to distraction by him the day before and there had been certain passages of vivacity between them which it had needed all the Doctor's tact and Parker's calm good sense to smooth.

The Doctor was shown into the morning-room, where he found Avril and George. He answered Avril's unspoken question at once. "No definite news, but I bring you hope."

"Oh, thank God!"

Avril looked worn out with anxiety. She had dark lines under her eyes and the Doctor guessed that she had hardly slept.

"Vincey's letter?" asked George, lighting a cigarette with a hand that was not quite steady.

"I can tell you very little, next to nothing," the Doctor said, taking the seat Avril indicated, next to her on the sofa. "Vincey . . . or, perhaps I should say, Prince Ter-nine, has sworn me to secrecy. I can only tell you that he has a clue, something really more than a clue, which he is following up. To-day is Saturday: before midday on Monday you should get a telegram from him giving you Jérôme's exact whereabouts. I shall be here; all my men will be warned to be ready to act at a moment's notice, by the evening I hope you will have your son with you, or anyhow that you will be on your way to meet him on his way back, if he is at a greater distance than I think he is."

Avril rose swiftly and walked to the window. She could not speak.

"You really think that?" said George eagerly. "You really have reason to think that Vincey will succeed."

"At a cost, yes," the Doctor replied, in a low voice.

George looked at him sharply, and raised his eyebrows enquiringly.

"It will be poor Boris who will bear the cost," the Doctor added, in a lower voice still.

"How can I thank you?" Avril came towards him with outstretched hands. "How can I thank you? Oh, I know it is not certain . . . there are still dangers; we must not hope too much . . . but at least there is hope, there is something" . . .

"*Dum spiro spero!* 'Tis the Fennix motto, Avril," George said.

The Doctor kissed Avril's hand. "It will not be I whom you will have to thank, madame, if your son is returned to you safe and sound on Monday as I hope and trust he will be; but a gallant gentleman who has played a misunderstood part in this affair. It is Prince Ternine whom you will have to thank. In this he is giving a final proof of his devotion, which, if I may say so, has never varied, in spite of anything you may think to the contrary."

"I do not quite understand . . ." began Avril, with a sudden flush.

"Think kindly of Boris, madame. Let that be your thanks to him."

"Prince Ternine will not come back?" Avril's voice took on a new tone. Fennix was regarding the Doctor intently.

"No, madame, he will not come back. You have seen the last of Julian Vincey."

There was a moment's silence.

"Is that all you have to say?" Avril broke out suddenly.

"When Jérôme is back—not before, for I am pledged—I will tell you a story. Till then, think kindly of my friend." The Doctor turned to George. "All you have

got to do is to wait as patiently as you can. I will do all that is necessary. Good-bye."

What had happened, you see, was this: Vincey's letter was from Wanda, scribbled during their stop at Genoa. Jakobsen, through carelessness or in an unwonted moment of confidence, had let out where Jérôme was; and Wanda, seeing her opportunity, grabbed it with the tenacity of an unscrupulous woman very much in love. You must remember that her passion for Vincey bordered on madness. Have him she would at all costs, willing or unwilling. His rebuff meant nothing to her, that rebuff on the terrace at Monte Carlo. Given time he would come to love her as she loved him. No man born of woman could resist her beauty. That was what she thought. This, then, was what she proposed. If Vincey would take her away from Jakobsen, elope with her, and swear on the memory of his mother that he would never desert her, she would tell him where Jérôme had been hidden. It was a business-like letter for a woman so much in love, but Wanda was no fool. She had planned it all with the greatest care. She and Jakobsen, her husband, were going to their villa on the slopes above Gardone, between there and Salò. Vincey was to follow at once, stay in Brescia twenty miles away, motor over in the evening, meet Wanda after dark at the bottom of their garden or rather "property," which consisted of vineyards and olive orchards, take her away . . . and he could telegraph Jérôme's place of concealment from the nearest town. He was to meet her on the Sunday night, if he could manage it; if not, on Monday. Jakobsen was a heavy sleeper and always had a room to himself; and the body-guard was absent.

"You cannot do it, Boris," the Doctor had cried when Vincey had shown him the letter.

Vincey had looked at him with haggard eyes. "It is worse than death; but if I did not do it, I could never look you or anyone else in the face again."

The Doctor said no more; but he shuddered for his friend. He almost dreaded the arrival of the longed-for telegram, which would mean that Vincey had bought Jérôme's freedom with his own.

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On Monday morning, the Doctor went over to the Villa Cheverney early. A telegram sent off at eight o'clock from Verona for example might arrive any time from nine onwards if the wires were clear. He had hoped against hope that they would get independent information as to Jérôme's whereabouts in the course of Saturday or Sunday, in which case he was to have telegraphed to the address Vincey had given him in Brescia; but he had heard nothing.

The Villa Cheverney folk with the exception of Avril, who was moving restlessly about the morning-room in a state of agitation, were trying to pretend that they were not tuned to the highest pitch of nervous tension. Courtney was practising putting on the lawn with Hilda, Colette was playing the piano in a distant drawing-room, Harry was hanging about the gate to get first sight of the telegraph boy, George was pretending to look at the pictures in last week's *Sketch* and Parker was playing patience.

The Doctor had barely assured George that he had breakfasted two hours ago (he was an early riser) and that he would not take a cocktail (which he regarded as an invention of the devil) when the front door bell rang. Avril ran to the door, George's paper slipped unheeded on to the floor and Dr. Parker stopped shuffling his patience cards.

Grove appeared.

"Mr. von Arndt wishes to know if he can speak to you in private, sir," he said solemnly to George.

George glanced at Avril.

"Show him into the library, Grove. Mr. Fennix will come in a minute."

"Terms!" observed Parker, when Grove had gone. "Old man Arndt has come to make terms."

"Don't you think it would be better for you and Courtney to see him too, Avril?" George said.

"Not at this point," the Doctor broke in. "You must play him, keep him talking as long as you can. Let him propose terms to you first, then say that you must discuss them with the Duchesse and her brother . . . take up all the time you can. The telegram may arrive any minute; that is to say if things have gone right with our friend."

George nodded; "Yes, that is the plan. All right, I will do my best."

He found Arndt in the library gazing at the portrait of a former duc de Cheverney with an interest which was much too absorbing to be anything but feigned. George shut the door behind him.

"Will you sit down?" George pointed to a chair and sat down himself at the great writing-table in the middle of the room. "What can I do for you?" he asked curtly.

"I have come about the—shall we say?—loss that you have recently sustained," Arndt returned, in a voice which, George noticed, lacked its usual confidence. He guessed that negotiations of this sort were rather out of his line, and that the job was not to his liking.

"I see." George's voice was not encouraging.

Arndt pulled out a cigarette case. "May I smoke?"

"If you like," George replied coldly, "but I must remind you that this interview is not of my seeking and the sooner it is over the better I shall be pleased."

"The last time, Mr. Fennix," began Arndt with an

assumption of ease, "that we met to speak together we met as enemies: to-day I have come as a friend."

This was too much even for George's diplomacy.

"Have you, by God! Then the quicker you take your friendship elsewhere the better for you. . . ."

"Mr. Fennix! One moment, please. You will repent it if you are hasty. It is in my power to do you and Mme. de Cheverney a very great service. I know where the duc de Cheverney is hidden."

"I never doubted that for a moment," George snorted.

"Yes, but . . . you have not quite got my point yet. I have not come here on behalf of Jakobsen, who, between ourselves, was responsible for his disappearance. I have come on my own behalf . . . and on Lady Harriet's."

George saw.

"We are," continued Arndt, with a smile that was meant to be ingratiating, "modest . . . in our suggestions as to an arrangement. You see, Louis is a megalomaniac and thinks in millions; we only think in hundreds of thousands. Louis is obsessed with the S.I.B.V.; we have come to the conclusion that the S.I.B.V. is more trouble than it is worth; it is not profitable enough . . . to us. We have too much respect for the world to want to dupe its most prominent citizens; we prefer the protection of those citizens. . . ."

"In short," snapped George, "you have come to sell your master."

Arndt waved a deprecatory hand.

"Come in!"

Someone had knocked on the door. It was Harry; and he held a telegram. George snatched it from him.

"Jérôme hidden apartment below Lady Harriet Tuff's in name of Madame Junot really belonging Lady Harriet Vincey."

It was sent off from Brescia.

"Will you excuse me a minute?" George said, in a politer voice. "Harry, you might stay and entertain Mr. von Arndt while I see about this, will you?"

Avril, Courtney and the Doctor were already in the car when George came out into the hall.

"I'll keep Arndt here until you are back," he said with a grin. "Do you think there will be any resistance?"

"Unlikely, with Arndt over here," replied the Doctor. "But Fugger and Mario Torricelli will be there in case of accidents. We ought to have thought of her having the ground flat. The invalid gentleman supposed to occupy the top flat is probably a figment, too. She owns the whole house, I expect. That accounts for a lot of things."

"Oh, go on, go on!" cried Avril. "What does it matter what she owns. Let her own the Casino if she wants to! Good-bye, George."

The car shot up the drive.

George was smiling when he returned to the library. Arndt would prove an amusement while they were away, and if anything went wrong he might prove a convenient hostage.

"Well, Mr. von Arndt," said George, almost with cordiality, "as you have come on a different mission from the one I imagined, let us discuss things *a l'amiable*. Harry, tell Grove to bring us cocktails, will you? Tell him to fill the big shaker." George lit a cigarette. "Now, Mr. von Arndt," he said when Harry had left them, "let us hear your proposal."

Arndt hesitated, a little suspicious of George's change of tone. Then he brightened; while George was out of the room, of course, the Duchesse had told him to settle quickly and at any cost. Arndt determined to increase his demand by a hundred thousand dollars.

"Well, if you like," George said amiably, "I will begin. I will give you a proof of good faith by putting our cards

on the table. We want my nephew back, and we want an assurance that we shall be left in peace by your organization. This sort of underground warfare is rather wearing for people who are not used to it."

"One of the advantages of dealing directly with me," returned Arndt with a self-satisfied grin, "is that I am the only person who can secure you immunity from the further annoyance which you desire."

"Oh," said George, "how's that?"

"We will suppose for the sake of argument that you were dealing with Louis Jakobsen. His price for the return of your nephew was to have been—is—four million dollars. You would have been given a time-limit of a week or so to think about it and to raise the money, but you would have paid. Oh, yes, you would have! You and Vincey, though you managed to get the better of Louis once or twice, have had enough experience of him to know that he is a devil ('All the same, he is a cut better than you,' thought George), and if he said, let us say, that if the money was not paid by such and such a day the young *duc* would lose a thumb and then, after another week's delay, an ear, you would know that he would keep his word. You would have paid, the boy would have been returned; but you would never have been safe from Louis. If you had breathed a word against him or his schemes, he would have fought you, and even if you succeeded in smashing the S.I.B.V. as you would have done in the long run, you would never have lived to see your victory; and your success would create such a disturbance in the world at a time when a disturbance is least needed that it would be the equivalent of a defeat. But . . ."

"One moment," interrupted George, "here are the drinks."

When Arndt had been given a cocktail and Grove had retired, George said: "All that may or may not be true,

but I do not see yet how our position is bettered by dealing directly with you. We will take it that the ransom you mention, which is of course preposterous, is divided by forty, and that we pay you that amount to have the boy back a few days earlier than would be the case if we left the matter in the hands of the authorities; but how does that safeguard us from the attacks of Jakobsen and his desperadoes?"

"We will discuss the amount of the ransom later," Arndt replied, with cool effrontery. "By dealing with me and Lady Harriet, you not only save a very considerable amount of money, but," here Arndt leant forward and George's natural fastidiousness caused him to make a slight movement of recoil, "but Louis Jakobsen does not get the four millions which he must have—or rather a good proportion of which he must have—to carry on at all. Without the ransom he is finished, powerless, 'bust.' The S.I.B.V. was always a gamble. If he could get it going, and if he was let alone in a certain quarter, it would have been a success. It will be a success still if you deal with him instead of with me, for he will make you pay every cent of that four millions ('Will he!' thought George), but without it he will not be able to carry on, he will be disowned by his masters and the S.I.B.V. will burst like the South Sea Bubble."

After Arndt had enlarged on this subject for a considerable period, unimpeded, we may be sure, by George, who replenished his glass from time to time, the latter observed:

"I should have thought it would have been better worth your while to have stuck to Jakobsen and a successful S.I.B.V. He will be a nasty enemy when he knows you have sold him."

"Not so bad as Vincey and the Society of Nobles," Arndt returned with candour. "I may mention that one

of our conditions is that we shall be let alone by them. I can deal with Louis, if I am independent and he has no backing, but one man is powerless against a society."

"I see," said George, his ears pricked for the first sound of the others' return. "I see. May one ask what your future plans may be, supposing of course that we come to mutually satisfactory terms?"

"I don't mind telling you," Arndt replied, "that I shall clear out for South America. I know a place where a lot can be done with a few hundred thousand dollars."

"Don't be too modest," said George sarcastically. "Are you proposing to rob Europe by taking Lady Harriet Tuff and her inebriate husband with you? That would be a pity."

There were voices in the hall. Avril's, Colette's . . . yes, by Heaven! Jérôme's!

"Lord, no!" Arndt replied, draining his glass, "I have seen enough of her to last me a lifetime."

George rose briskly.

"Well, Mr. von Arndt, I am afraid you will have to start your new career in South America without any assistance on our part; and as I have no control over Vincey and his friends (and would not exert it if I had any) I should advise you to start with the least possible delay."

Arndt jumped to his feet. His face was grey.

"You refuse to deal?"

"I refuse to deal."

"Then you will never see your nephew again."

George flung open the door. "You are wrong, Arndt: you are wrong." A group of which Jérôme was the centre, a bewildered, laughing Jérôme, became visible to Arndt's horrified gaze.

"You are wrong," George repeated in a voice that rang, "I can see him now."

CHAPTER XVII

A LETTER FROM VINCEY AND HOW IT AFFECTED THE DUCHESS

FIVE days later, about nine o'clock in the morning, the Doctor was sitting in his garden when his servant brought him a note which had been delivered by hand. It was from Mme. de Cheverney, was dated over-night and ran as follows:

"You probably wonder why I have not asked you to tell me before now the story you promised. It is from no lack of gratitude to Prince Ternine, from no lack of interest in his welfare . . . but, how shall I express it? You hinted you know something that was unknown to others, perhaps unknown to me. I cannot yet follow the twists and turns of the events with which we have been recently surrounded . . . and perhaps the most difficult thing of all to understand is that part played by 'Mr. Vincey' (I cannot help thinking of him under that name); not the part he played as one of the chiefs of the Society of Nobles—I have become accustomed to that idea—and understand it—but the part he played in relation to me. There, it is out at last! If your story throws any light, any helpful light, on this, I should like to hear it—otherwise, I would rather remember 'Mr. Vincey' simply in connection with his seemingly miraculous discovery of Jérôme's hiding-place, for which I shall always owe him a debt of gratitude so great that I fear I shall never be able to pay even a portion of it.

"Come to lunch to-day, will you? And if you think fit, tell me your story. All this excitement and anxiety have

worn me out, and I am thinking of going away shortly, though I have made no plans yet. Jérôme has entirely recovered from his horrible experience and feels very important, though he cannot understand why I have forbidden him to mention his adventure to a soul. . . .”

The Doctor folded the note carefully and returned it to its envelope. So she did care, after all. This five days' silence had made him think she was . . . well, not the woman poor Boris had thought she was. Boris! Where was he? In what particular hell of disappointment and mental loneliness and aggressive passion was he living with that woman? Not a word had been heard of him since his telegram, sent off from Brescia. Why Brescia, twenty miles from the scene of the elopement, and the despatch of the telegram eight or nine hours after the elopement was supposed to have taken place? Certainly he could not send a wire before the offices were open, but he ought to have been further away than Brescia by then. He had once told him that Jakobsen was of a madly jealous disposition. Wanda had told him so in that first interview. And Wanda was Jakobsen's wife. . . . The Doctor lit a cigarette. Why had Jakobsen passed his wife off as his sister? It was one of the many things he would probably never know, unless Boris . . . Vincey—he, too, had almost come to think of his old friend under his assumed name—should tell him later, much later, months or more likely years later, when they met. For he would never lose sight of him. The Doctor loved Vincey (we will stick to the name by which we first knew him) as a younger and favourite brother; he was a person to be indulged, helped, watched over, encouraged . . . and he was worth helping, worth encouraging, the Doctor reflected. The Society of Nobles was to a greater extent his creation than anyone's. Even Count Alexaieff, the actual originator of the scheme, whose political connec-

tions and knowledge of affairs had been invaluable, had not done more than Vincey. His energy had been inexhaustible, his courage and willingness to take risks without limit. He had faced death a hundred times . . . and now his career was to end in the arms of a woman he did not love. For his career was at an end: the Doctor knew that, because he knew his Vincey. He would stick to this woman though he loved another one—he had given her his word, he had sold himself into captivity to save Jérôme, and he would never try to wriggle out of the bargain—but it was the end. She was very likely not a bad woman; she certainly loved him, but she would be a hopeless drag on him physically and mentally. Mentally, they had nothing whatever in common, they hardly knew each other, physically . . . it was there that the tragedy would lie—she would be insatiable devourer of his manhood; he, the possessor of a woman he did not love . . . and whom, from the very nature of their intimate, and on his part loveless, relationship, he would very soon come to loathe. Vincey was no Joseph, but he needed something different from a physically rapacious mistress, however great her love for him. Above all other things, as the Doctor knew, he needed in his occasional intense moods of depression that peculiarly subtle form of help which can only be found in a close mental, almost spiritual, companionship with another person of the same keen temper. . . . The Duchesse . . . if it had been possible. She had her faults, but there was fineness in that woman. She had loved him: the Doctor was sure of it.

Wanda Lewel . . . when had Jakobsen married her? It must have been years ago. Her first husband had died a few months after they were married, Vincey had said, and she was married at seventeen. Probably Jakobsen had passed her off as his sister, in the hopes that

she would attract Courtney (as she had) or some other millionaire, and render him the more susceptible to her "brother's" appeals on behalf of the S.I.B.V. A fruitless plan, for apparently she had refused to attempt to influence Courtney. Or, perhaps, he wanted to pose as a free man in the hopes of attracting Mme. de Cheverney. . . .

"An answer? I did not know he was waiting for an answer. Tell him to say that I shall be very pleased to come to lunch. I shall want the car at half-past twelve."

When the servant had gone, the Doctor fell back into his reverie. The S.I.B.V. was smashed. Jakobsen, at the end of his resources and deserted by Arndt, was to all intents and purposes powerless. It remained to be seen what move he would make, whether he would try to bluff things out or whether he would make a bolt for it. A failure, he was certain to be disowned and discarded by Moscow, if worse did not befall him. George Fennix was already preparing his brother's mind—no easy task—for the blow. In this, strangely enough he was being aided by the suspect Francis Hanbury, who, with uncanny perspicacity, seemed to have already gauged the position of affairs and was fully prepared to flee the sinking ship . . . after giving his old skipper the final push overboard. Hanbury would prove useful in saving the S.I.B.V. from too sensational a collapse. He might even save it from collapsing at all, if there were any funds remaining and if Jakobsen could not negotiate them in a hurry. They might make him Secretary in Jakobsen's place. He was a clever man, and he would not dare to run crooked now.

Arndt and Lady Harriet had left Monte Carlo the day of Jérôme's rescue. It had not been difficult of accomplishment, that rescue; and the boy had been well treated. Lady Harriet had gone to Paris with her husband, and Arndt to Spain. He had been given to understand that

if he made his way straight to South America the Society of Nobles would leave him alone, but that if he was ever seen again in Europe . . . Arndt understood. No one had had speech with Lady Hetty, but she was being watched. There was a general inclination at the Villa Cheverney to be sorry for Captain Tuff. He was a poor creature, but marriage to Lady Harriet was a punishment out of all proportion to his misdeeds. The bodyguard had left the Cap Martin Villa for Italy, and it had been reported to the Doctor two days before that Dr. Rakoff had been seen in Monte Carlo, which delightful town he was apparently visiting for the first time. . . .

The Doctor glanced at his watch. The post ought to arrive at any minute. Perhaps at last there would be a letter from Vincey. He rose and took a turn or two up and down the garden. If there was a letter, how could it contain any but distasteful news? The very fact of the telegram proved that he had gone away with Wanda.

Ah! There was his servant. He held a salver. There was a letter. The Doctor took it quickly. Yes, it was from Vincey. . . . He ripped open the envelope. "*Bressanone, Alto Adige.*" . . . Ah! They had gone north. He knew the place, an old town with something of the glamour of the Middle Ages about it—Brixen, it had been called until the Italian occupation after the war. . . .

He read the letter once, and then read it again. Then he put it down on the wicker table by which he had been sitting.

"Is it possible?"

He read the letter a third time. . . . "It is almost unbelievable," he said aloud. "There has been nothing about it in the papers."

He picked up his letter and made for the house. Mario Torricelli was framed in the long open windows of the library.

"Mario! Mario!" he cried, "can you understand this?" He showed him a portion of the letter.

"Surely there would have been something in the papers. This is dated the day before yesterday."

"There was," replied Mario, looking up, "only I never connected it with Jakobsen. Most of the Italian papers had a short paragraph. The name they gave was the Conte di San Moro, or something like that. Jakobsen had a papal title, I know—and he must have been known by it in the neighbourhood. There was not much comment on it. They put it down to the usual thing. I fancy the 'Corriere della Sera' said something about the Conte di San Moro being a '*straniero*!' now I come to think of it. Well, that settles that—that is one comfort."

Mario lit a cigarette. He was an imperturbable young man. Also, not being on more intimate terms than those of ordinary good comradeship with Vincey, he did not realize the full import of the news.

"Where are you off to?"

"The Villa Cheverney," replied the Doctor, who had been telling the servant to have the car sent round at once. "I never knew before that Jakobsen had an Italian title."

"You mean a papal title," Mario remarked disgustedly.

"I mean a papal title," the Doctor returned with a smile.

"He bought it a good many years ago, according to Fugger, but I do not think he ever used it outside Italy. I suppose he found it useful to have a legitimate *alias*."

"By the way, Mario, I need not tell you that I am delighted to see you, but did you want to see me about anything in particular?"

"The Grand Duke would like you to go and see him. He wants you to have dinner with him to-night. He wants to hear all about Ternine; he does not understand

where he has gone and what he is doing. I could not enlighten him: in fact I do not understand now how it was he was down there on the lake of Garda. . . . You had better say you are unable to obey the Royal Command, but that you have a very adequate dinner here waiting to be eaten, if he will deign to join you. That will please him. Fugger and I will come, too."

The Doctor smiled. "All right: do you give him the message."

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"... so, you see, that was the explanation of the extraordinary scene you witnessed on the terrace at Monte Carlo. It was not his fault. He did not care a rap for the woman. The thing simply happened in the way I have told you."

Avril and the Doctor were in Avril's sitting-room at the Villa Cheverney; Avril in the corner of the sofa, the Doctor standing with his back to the mantelpiece. Avril sat silent and very still.

"And then he did not dare to explain; he could not. . . . You would not have believed him—no woman would have—and he would have been worse off than ever."

"When did he tell you that?" Avril's voice was very low.

"While you were away in Paris," the Doctor replied. "And it was then that he told me that he loved you."

"Go on."

"After that, there came the ball and Jérôme's disappearance. There is no object in touching on the rights and wrongs of that. We will call it the fortune of war, and leave it at that. If we were to blame, it was at least as much my fault as his, and if you feel aggrieved . . ."

"Don't!" Avril cried suddenly. "Don't be cruel! Cannot you see that I am stripped of pride . . . that nothing matters now. . . ."

The Doctor walked to the window and stood there for a moment, looking out into the garden. "And then when Jérôme disappeared and we could not find him," he said, turning round, "Vincey received a letter from the Baroness Lewel, as we will continue to call her, in which she swore to reveal the place where Jérôme had been hidden, on the condition that our friend would take her away from Jakobsen and devote the rest of his life to her."

"What?" Avril looked at him with horror-stricken eyes. "You don't mean . . . Oh, my God!"

"It was Vincey's acceptance of those conditions, which I need not tell you . . . but there, I do not want to harrow you." The Doctor's rather grim expression softened as Avril broke into a passionate storm of weeping. His way of telling his tale certainly contained an element of cruelty, but he had a reason for wanting to discover to what extent she reciprocated Vincey's love. It must be remembered that he only knew her comparatively slightly . . . and he cared for his friend more than anyone on earth.

The Doctor put his hand lightly on Avril's shoulder. "Do not cry," he said softly, "things are not as bad as you think. I only wanted you to realize how great his love and devotion were."

Avril, her face stained with tears, looked up at him. "Tell me . . . quickly. I cannot bear the thought . . . him . . . my lover and her. . . ."

"Read this," returned the Doctor, giving her the letter he had received a short hour before. "You see, he writes from Bressanone in Tyrol, or rather what used to be Tyrol. He went straight from Brescia after . . . after what happened."

Avril snatched the letter and devoured it with bent head. This is what she read:

"My dear friend, I sent you a telegram from Brescia yesterday morning giving the address of the place where Jérôme was hidden, and then came straight on here, where I shall remain until I hear from you. Terrible things have happened; in the long run, perhaps a simplification, but none the less terrible to me, who saw them enacted. This was the way of it, cursorily.

"At Brescia, I hired a car to go over to Gardone, for Jakobsen's *villino* is nearer to that place than to Saló, and as it chanced, found that the garage owner was an old acquaintance of mine from Milan, where I once spent some time. This simplified matters, for he was willing to let me drive the car myself without taking a chauffeur. As you will see, it was owing to this that I was able to escape from the scene of the tragedy without suspicion of complicity falling on me. I found Jakobsen's property without difficulty, a rather old-looking house, a converted farmhouse, I should imagine, and a few acres of straggling vines and olives, mostly uncultivated. That was at dusk. Then I went on to a place called Bolliaco (or Bogliaco, perhaps; some such name), where I dined at the hotel, returning to Gardone about eleven o'clock. I left the car at the bottom of the lane running up the hill past the property, and walked boldly through the gate, half-way up the lane, which let into a small orchard, the limit, I imagine, of their land. It was here that Wanda had told me to meet her in her letter. I should think the orchard was a couple of hundred yards from the house, and more than twice that distance from the main road; a deserted spot altogether, for there seemed to be no village or house within a considerable distance.

"After waiting some twenty or thirty minutes, she joined me. I will spare you an account of my feelings and of our conversation—it is all too near and too horrible! Yes, it was horrible, that conversation. You see,

she did not want to tell me where Jérôme was until later, and I refused to move until she did. We bargained like two Jews. Can you imagine it? There, among the olives, with the moon riding high over the lake, which one glimpsed in the distance through the trees. Why she should not have trusted me, I do not know. She was in a mad mood, entirely reckless. . . . I think she had some idea of conquering me by her beauty, making me take her away, regardless of the pact. I do not suppose she cared one way or the other about Jérôme. She had no wish that he should be kept a prisoner. She would possibly have told me of her own free will where he was, afterwards . . . who knows? But she wanted to prove her power over me. She little knew, poor woman, what I really felt . . . how I loathed that vaunted beauty. And then Jakobsen shot her through the head!

"He was within a yard. We had been so taken up with our quarrel, or whatever you like to call it, that we had not noticed his approach across the grass. She fell—she must have died at once, for I found afterwards the bullet went clean through her head—and I was on him before he had time to fire again—or anyhow before he did fire again; I think he was so mad with jealousy that he hardly knew what he was doing, for he ought to have been able to put a bullet into me, too. We struggled like madmen over her body and finally I threw him. I had got hold of his wrist, and I had wrenched his arm round so far in an effort to keep his pistol off me that it was pointing at himself, or nearly. Be that as it may—I shall never know for certain exactly how it happened—as he fell over her body, the pistol went off and he shot himself—or I shot him (it does not matter in the least which) through the head. . . .

"He died about ten minutes later. I waited by them.

Do you realize that this horrible thing had happened . . . and I did not know where Jérôme was! It had happened for nothing, or so it seemed.

"When Jakobsen had breathed his last, I went through his pockets. There was a letter to Arndt, obviously just written, enclosed in an envelope addressed L. Marochetti and an address in Monte Carlo. The letter gave instructions as to how to proceed in the matter of the ransom, and it mentioned Jérôme's place of concealment. Details will keep, or this letter will never end. But he had apparently thought of a better plan than the one they had arranged for receiving the money.

"It was only after I had found this letter that I realized what a very dangerous position I was in. No one had come from the house, so presumably the shots had not been heard, but, though it looked at first sight like murder and suicide (by no means a rare crime in Italy) the police are no fools as a rule, and there was the chance that unless I was very careful I should be implicated. Luckily, the ground was as hard as nails and such signs of a struggle as there were might easily have been made by those two, if they had struggled. I left things in such a way that the police would jump to the obvious conclusion; then I found my car, and returned to Brescia, without meeting a soul in the neighbourhood of the property.

"I wonder if Wanda did know where Jérôme was hidden!

"I shall wait here until I hear from you. Give me some work, if you can. Perhaps you would like to see me? I could meet you in Paris at Alexaieff's or N.'s. We have smashed the S.I.B.V.: the adventure is over; but I feel as if the world had fallen about my head. I have only given you the bare story of these events. Your imagination will supply the rest. But it is not that which

troubles me, though it was horrible enough in all conscience. Had I never seen Heaven, I should not mind the outer darkness so much. Had I never met and loved Avril, I should not dread the grey, lonely, miserable future. My dear old friend, I am not going to whine, but it has simply broken me up. Give me work, lots of it, the more dangerous the better.

BORIS."

Avril returned the Doctor the letter, and rose without saying a word. She walked to the window and stared for long minutes towards the sea.

At last the silver voice of the Doctor broke the silence. "What are you going to do?" he asked.

"Do?" she cried, and there was a ring as of triumph in her voice. "Why, I am going to Bressanone, of course!"

If you should spend this winter on the Riviera and hope to meet any of our friends, I fear you will be disappointed. The Villa Cheverney is shut up; Prince and Princess Ternine are wintering in California; Jérôme is at school in England; and Courtney is in India shooting big game. On the whole he approved of his sister's marriage, though to this day he does not quite understand what "all that Jakobsen business" was about. Miss Belamy, after giving everyone the impression that she was going to marry Guy Rattray, unexpectedly accepted Dr. Parker, who had, it seems, fallen in love with her "right away." George Fennix is Envoy Extraordinary and Minister Plenipotentiary to a small and friendly European State. His capital is a pleasant one, the society is to his liking, and he has an opportunity to gossip over the exciting events of the past year, when he wishes to do so, with Colette, who has taken up her abode in the same town.

